KTH ROYAL INSTITUTE
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Doctoral Thesis in Industrial Economics and Management

“I Wanna be Free”

On the Challenges and Coping Strategies of Women Entrepreneurs in Sweden

AZIZA AL GHAFRI

Stockholm, Sweden 2024

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Abstract

Women's entrepreneurship is often presented as important for creating economic prosperity at the national level and is said to offer freedom, independence, and emancipation for women. The purpose of this study is to explore the conditions of women entrepreneurs that have different backgrounds in Sweden. To achieve this purpose, this study focuses on the challenges women entrepreneurs perceive and the coping strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The study adopts an intersectional gender perspective, grounded in research on entrepreneurship, gender, and ethnicity. It draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs in Sweden that have different backgrounds. The findings show that the challenges experienced by the women entrepreneurs included lack of support, being belittled, being excluded, having to work harder and be strong and having to adapt. The analysis discusses that these challenges can be understood as a result of gendered perceptions of entrepreneurship and processes of Othering. Ethnicity and race also play a role in shaping these conditions. The interviewed women deal with the conditions through four strategies: the assimilation strategy; the positive strategy, the ambiguity strategy, and the change strategy. The coping strategies are discussed in relation to empowerment and emancipation. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to developing concepts and conceptual relationships to capture how gender, ethnicity, and race impact women's conditions as entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Gender, gender equality, women entrepreneurs, gendered entrepreneurship, immigrant entrepreneurs, ethnicity, race, challenges, coping strategies, othering, identity work, belonging, empowerment, emancipation, Sweden.

Sammanfattning

Kvinnors entreprenörskap framställs ofta som viktigt för att skapa ekonomiskt välstånd på nationell nivå och sägs erbjuda frihet, oberoende och bemäktigande för kvinnor. Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka villkoren för kvinnliga företagare med olika bakgrunder i Sverige. För att uppnå detta syfte fokuserar studien på de utmaningar kvinnliga företagare upplever samt de strategier de använder för att hantera dessa utmaningar. Studien anlägger ett intersektionellt genusperspektiv som grundas i forskning om företagande, genus och etnicitet. Den bygger på kvalitativt empiriskt material som insamlats in genom semistrukturerade intervjuer med kvinnliga företagare i Sverige som har olika bakgrunder. Huvudresultaten visar att de utmaningar som de kvinnliga entreprenörerna handlar upplevelser av brist på stöd, att bli förminskad, att bli exkluderad, att behöva arbeta hårdare och vara stark, samt att behöva anpassa sig. I analysen diskuteras hur dessa utmaningar kan förstås som ett resultat av könsmärkta föreställningar om entreprenörskap och s.k. Andrafieringsprocesser. Etnicitet och ras spelar också en roll i hur dessa villkor återskapas. De intervjuade kvinnorna hanterar villkoren genom fyra strategier: assimileringsstrategin, den positiva strategin, tvetydighetsstrategin och förändringsstrategin. Dessa strategier diskuteras i relation till begreppen bemäktigande och emancipation. Ur ett teoretiskt perspektiv bidrar denna studie till att utveckla begrepp och begreppsrelationer för att fånga hur kön, etnicitet och ras påverkar kvinnors villkor som företagare och deras strategier.

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Stockholm, January 1st, 2024

Aziza Al Ghafri

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Entrepreneurship studies in general have often neglected both gender and ethnicity, which implies that the main body of literature in the subject is built on experiences and patterns among men located in their own majority cultures (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Marlow, 2020). The consequence of this is that the experiences of minorities tend to be silenced in practical terms—such as in policy development, entrepreneurship support programs, incubators and educational settings—but also in theoretical terms. Entrepreneurship is therefore often treated as equally available to everyone, and as purely a matter of individual traits, business models, local/regional cultures and economic policy. Even when women's entrepreneurship is recognized as a subject in its own right, gender-based power relations are often excluded from the analysis. Although there is a growing body of literature on women entrepreneurs drawing on gender theories, it is mainly white women in Western contexts that are in focus. There are still few studies with a gender perspective that take an intersectional approach to women entrepreneurs (Essers et al., 2023). Ethnicity has been a subject in entrepreneurship research, highlighting how ethnic minority entrepreneurs often rely upon networks based on family relations and common ethnicity (Kerr and Mandorff, 2023), but gender has mostly been neglected in these studies (Essers et al., 2023). Hence, the complexities and dynamics of the intersections of gender, ethnicity and entrepreneurship represent a need for new knowledge and new theorizing (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018).

There is a growing body of research that studies entrepreneurship drawing on gender theory and adopting an intersectional perspective (e.g., Essers and Benschop, 2009; Essers et al., 2023; Essers et al., 2017; Foss, 2010; Henry and Marlow, 2014; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021; Martinez Dy, 2015; Martinez Dy et al., 2017; Tedmanson et al., 2012). This thesis adds to this literature by exploring the conditions of women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds in Sweden.

Research Problem

Entrepreneurship is a concept that, in a Western context, has many positive connotations. Starting and running businesses is seen as an important engine for a country's economy, and as a means to promote gender equality (Rindova et al., 2009). Women's entrepreneurship is often presented as important for creating economic prosperity at the national level and is said to offer freedom, independence, and empowerment for women (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). For example, researchers have shown that women in different national contexts choose to start their own businesses as a way to handle a subordinate position (e.g., Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Goss et al., 2011; Marlow, 1997; Sundin and Holmquist, 1989). At the same time, research shows that women entrepreneurs face many challenges (Azmat, 2013). In fact, scholars argue that entrepreneurship does not necessarily lead to change but can even help to restore a subordinate position for women (Cálas et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2016; Verduijn and Essers, 2013; Verduijn et al., 2014).

A growing body of literature explores how women entrepreneurs cope with the challenges they face by focusing on their identity work, that is how women understand themselves as entrepreneurs in relation to their context (Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019). However, there is a need for more contextualized analyses of women's entrepreneurship that also considers the intersection of gender and other power relations such as ethnicity and class (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Ozasir Kacar et al., 2023).

The context of the present study is Sweden. Studying women who are entrepreneurs from an intersectional gender perspective in a Swedish context is relevant from both an empirical and theoretical perspective. Sweden is a particularly interesting context for the study of women entrepreneurs because it appears among the most highly ranked countries in terms of gender equality (Holmquist and Sundin, 2021). The promotion of gender equality in business life in general and in entrepreneurship in particular has been on the political agenda for a long time (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Nevertheless, structural barriers still exist, both in the labor market and in entrepreneurship. Although women and men are almost equally represented in the labor force, men dominate in management positions within business life (Statistics Sweden,

2022) and among entrepreneurs in Sweden (GEM, 2022). This has been labelled the "women entrepreneurship paradox" (Alsos et al., 2010). This paradox entails a low level of women entrepreneurs compared to men in a society that is perceived as well-advanced in terms of gender equality. Although there are studies of ethnic minority women entrepreneurs in Sweden (e.g., Abbasian and Yazdanfar, 2013; Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012; Pettersson and Hedberg, 2013; Webster, 2016; Webster and Haandrikman, 2017; Yeröz, 2019), there are still few studies that explore the conditions of women entrepreneurs from an intersectional perspective.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the conditions of women entrepreneurs that have different backgrounds in Sweden. To achieve this purpose, this study focuses on the challenges women entrepreneurs perceive and the coping strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The main research question is "what challenges do women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds perceive and what coping strategies do they employ to navigate these challenges?"

This thesis sets out to answer this question by analyzing interviews with women entrepreneurs in Sweden that have different backgrounds, drawing on an intersectional gender perspective. An intersectional gender perspective recognizes that gender, ethnicity, and class are constructed simultaneously (Holvino, 2010), and thus enables us to study similarities and differences in the conditions faced by women entrepreneurs and their coping strategies. The study therefore draws upon literature that focuses on how women's entrepreneurial identities are constructed in relation to structures and discourses that are both limiting and enabling (e.g., Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Barragan et al., 2018; Bruni et al., 2004a; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2021; Lewis, 2013; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Stead, 2017; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019; Ozasir Kacar et al., 2023).

A note on gender, race and ethnicity

In this study, gender is viewed as a socially constructed power relation that is reproduced through social practices and processes at the societal, organizational, and individual levels (e.g., Ahl, 2002; Alkhaled and Berglund,

2018; Alsos et al., 2010; Bruni et al., 2004a; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Lewis, 2006; Marlow, 2014). When studying complex social issues related to power (Tedmanson et al., 2012), we cannot assume a gender-neutral perspective because this will reproduce the existing gender order in which women and femininity are subordinated and cast as the Other in relation to men and the male norm (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that gender is intertwined with other power relations, such as ethnicity and race, which are also embedded in organizations and societies (Acker, 2006).

Race is frequently used to describe differences based on presumptive inherent characteristics, such as skin color. The notion of color often refers to a person's skin color other than white, such as brown or black. White is a color but can also be understood as a regime of privileged power and authority that results from the intricate interactions between whiteness as a symbol of authority and dominance, and the material lives of people who are (or are not) white (Leonard, 2010). What is considered white or of color is a social construction that is context dependent. Whiteness is not only a norm, it also refers to the reproduction of dominance and privilege that takes on various forms depending on the context (Green et al., 2007). Whiteness has material consequences for people, because it perpetuates discrimination and inequality that have an impact on people's daily lives, and it is an ideology because it includes beliefs about inferiority and superiority (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014).

While race often refers to skin color, ethnicity is used in reference to culture (Holgersson et al., 2016). I understand ethnicity as the social organization of cultural difference (Jenkins, 2008). Ethnicity is both individual and collective, based on shared meanings that are produced and reproduced through social interaction and discourse. The meaning of ethnicity is highly situational and contextual and results in divisions between Us and Them (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Race and ethnicity are thus concepts that are socially constructed and by means of which power differences between groups are (re)established (Holgersson et al., 2016). As Nkomo and Al Ariss (2014) argue, any group can be the victim of discrimination and inequality based on race or ethnicity, and the specific forms of ethnic (white) privilege that exist today must be understood in the context of their historical development.

This study adopts an intersectional view of gender, ethnicity, and race. Intersectionality has emerged over a long period of time as an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the interactions between different categories that organize or form the social structure of society and explain the influence of these categories on political access and equality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007; Martinez Dy, 2020). From an intersectional perspective, the interconnections between gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religious characteristics produce hierarchical relationships of power, inequality, exclusion, and social marginality at the societal, organizational, and individual level (Acker, 2006). In addition, these characteristics differentiate those who are perceived as entrepreneurially disadvantaged in relation to the hegemonic ideal of the white male entrepreneur (Martinez Day, 2020; Ogbor, 2000). Indeed, it is more difficult for groups such as women, ethnic minorities, or working-class people, to access capital and resources for startups (Marlow and Patton, 2005; Scott and Hussain, 2019).

The labels I have chosen to describe the women interviewed for this thesis are based on my understanding of the concepts of gender, ethnicity, race, and color. Even though it was difficult, I have chosen to use the terms white women and women of color based on my understanding of the existing literature. The term “of color” allows me to mask the different nuances of dark-colored skin and the term white allows me to be clear about the person’s belonging to a dominant group in Swedish society. By using the terms white and of color, instead of referring to a certain racial group or specific color when describing participants, I have tried to safeguard their anonymity. Furthermore, I have chosen the terms ethnic minority/majority, Swedish and immigrant to describe the ethnic background of the interviewees. These are imprecise terms, but they give an indication of each individual’s relationship to Swedish society and other nations or ethnic groups. Accordingly, the participants in this research are divided into four different groups based on their ethnic background and color: Swedish white women, Swedish women of color, immigrant women of color, and immigrant white women. I acknowledge that using these categories also contributes to reproducing them. I therefore strive to be reflexive about my use of the concepts, drawing on previous research and

being guided by what I believe are the best ways to understand my interviewees' experience while safeguarding their anonymity.

Overview of the chapters

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. **Chapter One** introduces the research topic of women entrepreneurs, the challenges they face and their coping strategies as well as the purpose of the thesis. **Chapter Two** provides an overview of the theoretical framework that used in the analysis of the empirical data. This includes literature related to women's entrepreneurship, the challenges facing women entrepreneurs and their coping strategies as well as research on the conditions of women managers and their coping strategies. **Chapter Three** contains a description of the research design and how the empirical data was collected and analyzed. This chapter includes a discussion of the trustworthiness of the present study. The empirical setting, including the Swedish context, is presented in **Chapter Four**. In **Chapter Five,** the results of the empirical data analysis about the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are presented. In **Chapter Six** the conditions and coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs are discussed. In **Chapter Seven**, different forms of empowerment and emancipation are discussed based on the findings in the two previous chapters. As a final point, conclusions and contributions are presented in **Chapter Eight.** This Chapter also discusses practical implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I present my theoretical framework, consisting of previous research focusing on gender and entrepreneurship; coping strategies employed by women entrepreneurs; Othering and belonging; and emancipation and empowerment. I also present some insights from research on women managers' conditions and strategies that also inform my analysis.

The topic of women's entrepreneurship emerged as an academic field of interest in the 1980s, with early texts such as Hisrich and Brush (1987) and Goffee and Scace (1985). It has since developed into a large body of literature (for overviews, see for example: Hughes et al., 2012; De Bruin et al., 2006; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). Building on a framework developed by Alsos et al., (2013), Stawser et al., (2021) outline different approaches to women's entrepreneurship within this body of literature. One approach views entrepreneurship as a result and focuses on its outcomes, for example, innovation, the formation of new firms, job creation, venture capital, and growth. Another approach views entrepreneurship as a process, and studies the entrepreneurial journey and the different stages of the entrepreneurial process, as well as analyzing the transition that founders experience as they move from one point to another during their entrepreneurial journey. In a third approach, entrepreneurship is viewed as a discourse, and this approach examines knowledge production, unpacking the language used by entrepreneurs and others to describe and conceptualize their ventures.

Additionally, Stawser et al., (2021) identify the different, and often overlapping, ways in which gender has been studied. One strand of studies treats gender as a mere variable and focuses on differences and similarities between women and men. Another strand sees gender as a social construction and therefore focuses on an examination of how gender is constructed. A third strand treats gender as a practice and examines how gender is done; that is, how it is created and recreated through daily practices.

This study takes its point of departure in an understanding of gender and entrepreneurship as socially contructed through everyday practices. As the

study focuses on women entrepreneurs' challenges and coping strategies based on interview data, the analysis mainly draws upon literature that explores how the gendered nature of entrepreneurship is discursively constructed. Nevertheless, this study is also informed by empirical studies of the challenges that women entrepreneurs face, keeping in mind that many of these studies treat gender as a variable, or are not explicit about how they understand gender.

Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship is often seen as a way for women to achieve independence, flexibility, and empowerment (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Benali and Villesèche, 2023). However, entrepreneurial activities are demanding and complex and research has found that women face more challenges than men (Lepeley, 2019). Numerous studies have been conducted in relation to the challenges and barriers to women's entrepreneurship in different contexts globally. These studies point out different challenges, such as the lack of a business network, the lack of financial or other resources, sociocultural factors, household responsibilities, lack of skills, and lack of institutional and social support (McAdam, 2022). There are also studies that focus specifically on the challenges facing women immigrant entrepreneurs (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2011). These challenges include factors such as restrictive government regulations and access to capital, along with language and culture issues, and lack of local knowledge (Dhaliwal et al., 2010; Kantor, 2002; Liversage, 2009; Raijman and Semyonov, 1997; Volery, 2007).

Azmat (2013) has identified the possible challenges and opportunities that women entrepreneurs face and summarized these into a conceptual framework. These challenges and opportunities are related to gender, ethnicity, culture, family, social capital, human capital, and institutional factors. Although Azmat proposed the framework for the study of women immigrant entrepreneurs, it can be applied to the study of any woman irrespective of ethnic background or if she belongs to an ethnic minority or majority.

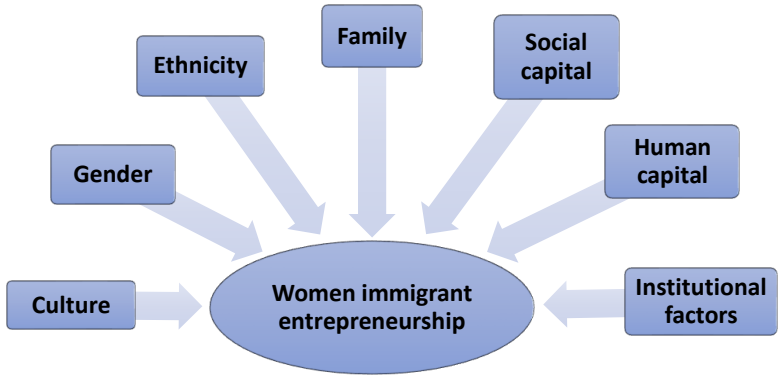


Figure 2.1: A framework of possible barriers or enablers faced by immigrant women entrepreneurs (Azmat, 2013).

Gender challenges refer to the factors that act as barriers to immigrant women entrepreneurs because they are women. Azmat (2013) argues that the problems faced by women are a global phenomenon and not just limited to developing countries; nevertheless, they are more pronounced in such countries. Despite reforms in developing countries, women do not enjoy the same basic human rights and freedoms as men, even though women participate in economic activities on a par with men. Ethnicity also affects women entrepreneurs since immigrants often face disadvantages such as lack of capital, language fluency, and access to information, which limit their employment opportunities in the labor market. As a result, immigrants will be more likely to accept jobs with low pay and lower status. These disadvantages are greater for immigrant women than for immigrant men. Azmat argues that a challenge can simultaneously act as an enabler and a barrier. For instance, immigrants use their cultural characteristics, linguistic skills, ethnic contacts, knowledge, and identity and gender-related experiences to their advantage. However, a dual effect of gender and ethnicity creates barriers rather than opportunities for women immigrant entrepreneurs, creating a double disadvantage. Azmat also refers to a "triple disadvantage," adding a third dimension related to being immigrants from developing countries. Azmat (ibid.) argues that women immigrant entrepreneurs from developing countries

are considered the most disadvantaged group among entrepreneurs, as they find it particularly challenging to adapt to the institutional framework and labor markets in more developed economies.

Women entrepreneurs often report challenges related to work–life balance. For women immigrant entrepreneurs, becoming an entrepreneur often entails a shift from a "family strategy" to an "independence strategy" as they move from the role of unpaid worker to becoming decision-makers in their own or family business. Azmat (2013) argues that such challenges mostly apply to educated women immigrant entrepreneurs in industrialized economies. Cultural characteristics such as family ties, religious beliefs, work ethic, and compliance with social values, can be either challenges or enablers for immigrant women entrepreneurs. For instance, cultural characteristics, such as reliance on family labor, can facilitate entrepreneurship, while religious beliefs and cultural norms can become obstacles.

In Azmat's (2013) framework, human capital refers to the competence and qualifications that an entrepreneur acquires through work experience, training, and education. Research suggests that women in developing countries have less human capital than men due to their low levels of formal education, the low social status of women, and poverty, and that this can be a disadvantage for them when they move to more developed economies. Even when immigrant women entrepreneurs have higher levels of human capital, this human capital is often devalued, especially if their qualifications were obtained from developing countries. Drawing on previous research, Azmat (ibid.) also proposes that women immigrant entrepreneurs do not develop the same types of (often informal) social networks as men due to lack of mobility and socio-cultural barriers. Furthermore, Azmat (2013) argues that the differences in institutional factors such as legislation, regulations, and enforcement between their country of origin and country of residence can also affect immigrant women's entrepreneurship.

The literature on the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, irrespective of whether they are immigrants or not, focuses on entrepreneurship as a result and/or a process, and views gender as a variable (cf. Stawser et al., 2021). At best, the theories that are used to understand these challenges acknowledge

that there exist status differences between women and men and stereotyped perceptions of women, but they seldom clearly draw upon an understanding of gender as a social construction or as a power relation that intersects with other power relations in society. The problem when gender is treated as a variable is that, in relation to an unnamed male entrepreneurship norm, women entrepreneurs are easily interpreted as deficient as entrepreneurs, e.g., lacking in ambition and capabilities (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Foss et al., 2019). Marlow (2020) highlights that, although women entrepreneurs differ in relation to men in certain regards, for example they are fewer in number and their ventures are often part-time, home-based, and not growth-oriented, this is a result of the gender order. To avoid seeing women as the problem, but rather understanding that gender and entrepreneurship are reproduced through multilevel dialectic processes by which the inter-personal level interacts with the organizational and societal level, an exploration of the gendering of contexts is necessary (Welter, 2020).

Gendered entrepreneurship

Scholars drawing on gender theory have questioned the essentialized view of gender that has dominated much research on entrepreneurship. The entrepreneur has often been described as having a high need for achievement, being optimistic, having a strong internal locus of control and a high need for autonomy, dominance, aggressiveness, a low need for support and conformity, being independent, task oriented, and prone to risk-taking (Chasserio et al., 2014). In Western societies, these characteristics are both male gendered and expected from someone who identifies as an entrepreneur. In addition, the dominant view of entrepreneurship is that of a rational, disembodied superhero without any commitments beyond their economic activity (Ahl, 2006; Bruni et al., 2004a).

This dominant entrepreneurship literature has been criticized for adopting a gender-blind perspective on entrepreneurship, failing to engage with more complex gender theories, and thereby uncritically reproducing gendered stereotypes and constructions of women as the Other, both different from and deficient in relation to a male gendered entrepreneurial norm (e.g.,

Achtenhagen and Welter, 2007; Ahl, 2002, 2006; ; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Berglund, 2007; Berglund and Johansson, 2007; Bruni et al., 2004a; Brush et al., 2009; Calás et al., 2009; Lewis, 2013; Ljunggren, 2002; Ljunggren and Alsos, 2006; Marlow et al., 2009; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Meliou and Özbilgin, 2023; Stead, 2017; Taylor and Marlow, 2009). Moreover, scholars have also highlighted that the entrepreneurship norm is not only masculine but also Western and white (Ahl, 2006; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Knight, 2016; Wingfield and Taylor, 2018).

Thus, despite entrepreneurship often being understood as accessible to everyone, women and men engaging in it will face different, gendered conditions (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009; Taylor and Marlow, 2009; Watson, 2009). As Martinez Dy (2020) argues, entrepreneurship is a processual, socially embedded activity conditioned by social structures. As a result, groups that are often seen as entrepreneurially disadvantaged, such as women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants, have in common that they do not correspond, either materially or symbolically, to the white male entrepreneurial norm. Therefore, the closer someone corresponds to the norm, the easier they will find it to access resources such as education, managerial experience, wealth, and powerful social networks. In contrast, and further away from the norm someone is, the more reduced will be their access to resources, and thus the more constrained their entrepreneurial agency will be. At the same time, entrepreneurs from disadvantaged groups tend to be held to the same standards as the norm; hence, they are likely to be seen as deficient in relation to the norm (ibid.).

In addition, it is important to highlight that understanding entrepreneurship requires a more refined awareness of the context that extends beyond simplistic analyses of how context influences entrepreneurial action. Scholars have emphasized that the context is “done” through the interplay between entrepreneurs and context (Baker and Welter, 2017; Gill and Larson, 2014). Entrepreneurs perceive and interpret their context and based on these perceptions and interpretations, they then do entrepreneurship (Bruni et al., 2004b) and construct their identities in ongoing everyday processes that are situated at specific intersections of power relations within a specific context. Therefore, opportunity structures will be perceived and interpreted differently

(Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019). To understand this interplay, Ozasir Kacar et al., (2023) propose that entrepreneurship can be contextualized through the analysis of opportunity structures. Such structures include institutional norms, applications, and procedures for women entrepreneurs, as well as the perceptions of the representatives of the participant institutions, as the implementers of the rules and regulations (Ozasir Kacar, 2021). Opportunity structures are simultaneously both constraining and enabling. Entrepreneurs engage in dynamic processes in which they interpret opportunity structures as either enabling or constraining, and in relation to these interpretations, they construct their identities and experiences as entrepreneurs (ibid.). Ozasir Kacar (2021) argues that entrepreneurs construct their identities in relation to these opportunity structures. If, for example, an entrepreneur experiences ethnic discrimination, she may either identify more strongly with her ethnic community, or distance herself from her ethnic background and identify with the wider local community in order to limit the effects of ethnic discrimination. For example, when studying Turkish migrant women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, Ozasir Kacar and Essers (2019) identified four opportunity structures: (1) government policies relating to migration and ethnic business development; (2) societal and political discourses about Turkish (Muslim) migrant women; (3) sociocultural ethnic norms and practices governing ethnic and business relations; and (4) the recent political context of Turkey, with its nationalistic policies and political sanctions against terrorist groups. Even though the interviewed women all had similar backgrounds, Ozasir Kacar and Essers found that they interpreted the opportunity structures differently, with some distancing themselves from their ethnic identities and constructing themselves as transnational and cosmopolitan, while others emphasized being Turkish within the Dutch context. The perceptions of opportunity structures are thus influenced by power relations such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class, and exploring the experiences of entrepreneurs thus offers a gateway to exploring the relationship between entrepreneurs' identity construction and opportunity structures.

The influence of neoliberalism and postfeminism on the entrepreneurial discourse has also been noted to affect how women perceive their context and construct their identities. For example, Jones and Clifton (2021) found that stories about being ignored by men were a recurring theme in their interviews

with women entrepreneurs in Wales. Being ignored was not understood as a challenge related to sexism, however, but was attributed to other issues or just left without comment. Instead, the women drew upon a postfeminist, neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurship that highlights freedom, autonomy, and choice. Had the women described being ignored as a result of sexism, they would have had to acknowledge their subordinate position in relation to men, which contradicts the postfeminist neoliberal norm. By denying it, sexism is rendered invisible, and these women fail to challenge the established gender order.

Coping strategies

Women entrepreneurs use different strategies to cope with the challenges they encounter. As noted above, there are different approaches to the study of women entrepreneurs, which result in different understandings of the challenges and appropriate coping strategies. For example, when the challenges that women entrepreneurs face are framed as a "lack of something," coping strategies are often seen as the actions that women take in relation to these. For example, studies have found that women entrepreneurs used support for their businesses from NGOs and governments, as well as government initiatives that focus on women, as a coping strategy in response to the challenge of lack of business networks (Tanusia et al., 2016). Other research focuses on funding; for example, the study by Fonjong (2004) identified saving and borrowing money from an informal community as coping strategies employed by women entrepreneurs in response to poor financial situations. Studies focusing on strategies to cope with work–family conflicts have concluded that delegating, organizing, prioritizing, and strategic planning are the most effective strategies used by women in order to cope with their competing roles in the family and at work (e.g., Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2009; Ferguson and Durup, 1998; Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Jennings and McDougald, 2007; Lo et al., 2003; Shelton, 2006).

Other studies focus on the coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs to reconcile their multiple social identities with the gendered, ethnicized, and racialized norms of entrepreneurship. Several studies have highlighted how

women entrepreneurs must navigate the dissonance between the discourses of womanhood/femininity and those of entrepreneurship to seek legitimacy and authenticity. For example, Diaz García and Welter (2013) found that the Spanish women entrepreneurs they studied engaged in two different sets of practices: reproducing gender differences by "doing gender" and challenging these differences by "redoing gender." Doing gender was achieved by emphasizing the dominant expectations of the ideal entrepreneur and of women while concealing their experiences of a lack of fit. They also understood that the conditions they faced were different and that they therefore had to employ special measures to clear these hurdles. Redoing gender was achieved by emphasizing the value that being a woman brought to business and the ways in which entrepreneurship empowered women, as well as finding support from other women. These practices are highly contextual. For example, Diaz García and Welter found that high-status women were more likely to redo gender, while those active in feminized areas with less professional experience were more likely to do gender. Similarly, Chasserio et al., (2014) explored different forms of identity work among French women entrepreneurs. These ranged, in order, from accepting social expectations and conventional norms as well as integrating them into their self-identity, or challenging them by transformation or accommodation, or by redefining norms or proposing new ones. These studies show that women's identities are actively constructed (Lewis, 2013). As Chasserio et al., (2014) argue, women entrepreneurs are not victims of their circumstances but have some room to maneuver. By being reflexive and emphasizing or downplaying certain identities to their advantage, they can build positive identities (ibid.).

In a similar way, Lewis (2013) writes about how women seek authenticity as entrepreneurs through identity work. In order to construct an identity as an entrepreneur in which women stay true to themselves, despite a male-gendered entrepreneurial discourse, Lewis (2013) found that women entrepreneurs seek authentic entrepreneurial identity by drawing on discourses of professionalism, associated with masculinity, and of difference, associated with femininity. The women in Lewis' study move between these two discourses and thereby subvert gender boundaries. By demonstrating that they can succeed as women in entrepreneurship, they can maintain a strong sense of authenticity (ibid.).

Other studies of women entrepreneurs have also shown that professional identity can be important for how women construct their identities as entrepreneurs. For example, when studying women entrepreneurs in the social care and healthcare sector, Kovalainen and Österberg-Högstedt (2013) found that these women developed a specific form of entrepreneurial identity when handling the tension emanating from the contradiction between stereotypical masculine entrepreneurial goals and stereotypical ideologies of care. By emphasizing their professional skills and experience, they succeeded in balancing being a woman and an entrepreneur, and an ideology of care. Similarly, Knight (2016) found that referring to a professional identity was important for women entrepreneurs of Afro-Caribbean origin in Canada in order to appear competent, respectable, and legitimate, and to deflect racist discourses about women of color. Nevertheless, drawing on this professional identity also had a disciplining effect on women who needed to adapt to a white norm.

The identity work of women of color and ethnic minority women entrepreneurs has also been studied. Essers and Benschop (2007), for example, explored the identity construction of women immigrant entrepreneurs by analyzing the life stories of Moroccan and Turkish female entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. Their results revealed that these female immigrant entrepreneurs used three strategies of identity work to handle the masculine connotations of entrepreneurship. One of these strategies consisted of complying with conventional images of femininity. Another involved condemning femininity and/or ethnicity situationally, and a third strategy disconnecting entrepreneurship from its masculine connotations. Furthermore, Essers and Benschop discussed how these women entrepreneurs constructed their ethnic, gendered, and entrepreneurial identities in relation to their Muslim identity. They found that different individual religious identities are crafted to stretch the boundaries of what is allowed for female entrepreneurs in order to resist dogmatic interpretations of Islam. Essers and Benschop use the concept of hybrid identity to describe the heterogeneous identities that migrants construct through their interactions with people in the surrounding society, dealing with other immigrant groups, people from the same ethnic group, and people from the same country of origin. The women

whom Essers and Benschop studied constructed hybrid identities by doing business from two cultural contexts, taking advantage of being able to take the best parts of both cultures as well as trying to transform them into something useful and new.

Building on these insights, Essers et al., (2010) developed the concept of female ethnicity to understand the meanings of femininity for immigrant women entrepreneurs. They found that the coping strategies developed by women immigrants to handle being the "Other other" include adopting hybrid identities, by which they cautiously challenge some of the more restrictive gender expectations. For example, some identify themselves as citizens of the world instead of linking themselves to one country. By constructing such a hybrid identity, women immigrant entrepreneurs take a trans-ethnic position as advantages so that they are not limited by restrictive manifestations of female ethnicity that could hinder their entrepreneurship (Essers et al., 2010).

Othering and belonging

Belonging has been identified as an important concept for understanding how women entrepreneurs handle experiences of being Othered. The concept of Othering has been developed within feminist theory to capture the dialectic processes by which the Norm and the Other, the powerful and the powerless, are identified and differentiated (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004). In these processes, the Other is identified in relation to the construction of the Same; the Same is attributed more power and status; and the Other is attributed a gender which, given the present patriarchal gender order in society, is feminine (ibid.). While Othering refers to the feeling or experience of being excluded from a group, belonging refers to the feeling or experience of being part of the group. Thus, in a workplace setting, belonging and Otherness are both produced in relation to a norm. The further someone diverges from the norm, the more the feeling and experience of Otherness is deepened (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004).

In a similar manner, Stead (2017) explores how women navigate gendered assumptions in order to belong. Here, belonging is understood as practices by

which “we relate to, assimilate, become accepted, recognized and included” (Stead, 2017, p. 64). In this understanding, there is thus an element of yearning to be accepted and included in the group. Stead identifies five practices by which women entrepreneurs perform belonging, drawing on previous research on how women entrepreneurs seek legitimacy and perform identity work, that is, processes whereby individuals shape their self-identity in relation to the different social identities available in the various contexts in which they live. Belonging can be performed by proxy, such as accessing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial networks through a male partner. Performing belonging by proxy may offer initial short-term benefits for women; however, by reproducing normative assumptions about entrepreneurship as a male activity, it may serve only to underscore men’s identification as entrepreneurs. By concealing their identity as women and/or entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs also perform belonging. However, concealment renders their entrepreneurial achievements invisible and thus contributes to reproducing the male norm in entrepreneurship, thereby excluding women from belonging.

Belonging is also practiced by modeling the norm, that is by replicating the dominant norm and reproducing the perception that women entrepreneurs are deficient. It can grant women honorary status, but this is an uncertain position that can be revoked by the dominant group at any time. Tempered disruption is yet another practice of belonging. It involves playing with gender norms, but in a careful way so as to still belong; for example, disrupting by being a very visible leader but tempering that disruption by the female-gendered nature of the business. The fifth practice of belonging that Stead (2017) identifies is identity-switching, which involves moving between different identities in different contexts. These complex gendered dynamics call attention to a complicated level of understanding, including when to make visible or conceal one’s entrepreneurial and female identities, when to mimic masculinized identities, and when to invoke or disrupt different, and multiple, identities in order to produce belonging (Stead, 2017). Highlighting how women use various strategies and efforts to belong to the Norm (such as a male entrepreneurship discourse), raises awareness and understanding of how gender operates in specific contexts to enable or block belonging, and where gendered boundaries can be widened (Stead, 2017). Accordingly, the performance of belonging can be understood as a continuous process of doing

belonging, rather than just a performance or a conscious act, which emerges in everyday activity/practice, and it opens up new options for disrupting embedded gendered assumptions (Stead, 2017).

Adding to the literature on entrepreneurial belonging, Essers et al., (2021) studied how Moroccan Muslim women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands achieve belonging. In the cases analyzed by Essers et al., the women entrepreneurs experience tensions when seeking to legitimize their entrepreneurial venture in relation to their families, their ethnic communities, and the majority population. For example, although they received support from their families, they also had to balance expectations of taking on traditional caring roles to acquire belonging. Essers et al., found that they engaged in several of the strategies of belonging identified by Stead (2017), identity-switching in particular, as a way to navigate entrepreneurial and womanhood/motherhood norms in different contexts and in relation to different stakeholders. Essers et al., (2021) highlighted that belonging in relation to one stakeholder group does not imply belonging in relation to another. Moreover, they argued that ethnic minority women entrepreneurs not only seek belonging in relation to different stakeholders, but they also need recognition and acceptance from these groups in order to belong and survive as entrepreneurs.

Emancipation and empowerment

The concepts of empowerment and emancipation are often linked to women's entrepreneurship. Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) developed a theoretical framework to analyze the relationship between empowerment and entrepreneurship and, drawing on the work of Longwe and Clarke (1994), they identified five interlinked stages of empowerment. The welfare stage represents the actual unequal resources available to women and men, the access stage is when women take action to improve their situation once they have discovered that the welfare provision is unequally distributed; the conscientization stage involves women becoming aware of inequalities resulting from socially constructed understandings of gender and entrepreneurship and starting to take action; thereby moving into the

participation phase, during which women engage family and community in addressing gender inequalities. Participation results in increased control over access to resources and benefits and becoming a role model. Becoming empowered is thus not only about achieving control, but also about using that control to continuously improve their conditions.

However, Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) argue that although entrepreneurship can be empowering for women by improving their conditions, it does not challenge power structures in society. Studying migrant Palestinian women operating home-based ventures in Jordan, Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) concluded that the majority of the women interviewed progressed at least to the participation stage, as they had created increased awareness concerning the heritage of Palestinians, motivated more women to engage in entrepreneurship, contributed to a sustainable sector within an unstable economy, improved their social status within and beyond their local context, and engaged in legitimate awareness-raising about the Palestinian situation. Although these women were able to improve their situations, some still had to deny or hide their entrepreneurial activities. Thus, the gender order remained largely unchallenged. However, Gill and Ganesh (2007) found that white US women entrepreneurs motivated their entrepreneurship with autonomy, opportunity, confidence, and self-expression, and despite experiencing discrimination and challenges in managing employees and balancing work and home, they felt empowered. Gill and Ganesh suggested that entrepreneurship can thus offer "bounded empowerment" for women.

There are similar discussions about the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship. Rindova et al., (2009, 2022) argue that the understanding of entrepreneurship can be broadened beyond mere wealth-creation by highlighting that it can also be seen as a way of overcoming inequalities and achieving social change and can thus be emancipatory. Rindova et al., (2009) propose that emancipatory entrepreneuring consists of three elements: seeking autonomy, that is, breaking free from authority and breaking up perceived constraints; authoring, that is, shaping relations that promote the venture's potential for change; and making declarations regarding intentions to create change in order to mobilize support and generate change.

Building on this concept of emancipatory entrepreneuring, Trivedi and Petkova (2022) identify emancipating activities among women entrepreneurs and a trade union for poor self-employed women in India. They find that these women and the trade union in different but complementary ways seek autonomy, engage in authoring, and make declarations. The women entrepreneurs also engage in a fourth activity, investing in the future. Trivedi and Petkova argue that the entrepreneuring activities of the trade union and the women entrepreneurs contributed together and over time to the women's empowerment and emancipation.

The idea of emancipatory entrepreneuring has been expanded to encompass not only the leader of the entrepreneurial venture but also its beneficiaries of such a venture in the study of women beneficiaries in a social enterprise in Tunisia by Benali and Villesèche (2023). Although engaging in entrepreneurship is here seen as a way to alleviate poverty, Benali and Villesèche show that the driving force of these women beneficiaries is not economic survival, but passion which can be interpreted as a form of resistance and search for autonomy. Benali and Villesèche find that the women beneficiaries engage in three forms of emancipation: affirming their dreams; navigating gender relations; defending their interests. Affirming their dreams consisted in the women persevering and fighting to realize their dreams albeit facing constraints related to power dimensions such as religion, class, age. The women beneficiaries also sought to break free from patriarchal oppression by finding strategies of resistance in their everyday lives but within the limits of their social and cultural context. Benali and Villsèche find that the women beneficiaries defended their interests and preserved their dignity by claiming the value of their work and asserting themselves as entrepreneurs. The women's efforts to emancipate from their subalternized position, that is, a position in which they are denied agency and silenced by dominant groups, is not entirely realized. Not all women beneficiaries were able to be equally assertive, and their efforts were mainly individual, not collective. Benali and Villsèche argue that although (social) entrepreneurship has the potential to contribute to these women's emancipation, intersectional differences will shape the forms of emancipation that they can engage in.

The idea of emancipatory entreprenuering has been challenged by scholars such as Verduijn and Essers (2013) who based their studies of migrant women entrepreneurs, argue that entrepreneurship may not be as emancipatory as expected. However, as Calás et al., (2009) argue, by studying the processes and practices of gendering, the reproduction of social conditions of domination and subordination, as well as the potential emancipation of entrepreneurship, can be explored. Building on this, Verduijn et al., (2014) suggested that entrepreneurship is not either emancipating or oppressive but should rather be considered as being in constant tension between emancipation and oppression. In order to capture such tension, Barragan et al., (2018) used the concept of micro-emancipation when studying women entrepreneurs in the patriarchal and Islamic society of the United Arab Emirates, where the men of the family condition women entrepreneurs' agency and identity. These men are not only gatekeepers of the dominant culture that constrains women, but also potential supporters of women's entrepreneurial activities. Women in this context are therefore strategic in obeying and disobeying men to micro-emancipate as women entrepreneurs. However, Jennings et al., (2016) question the idea of entrepreneurship as a means of emancipation within a developed economy context. They find that although it was not uncommon that women and men in a Canadian had start their business partly for work–family reasons, few had achieved this in practice. Jennings et al., (p. 21) argue that "entrepreneurship itself is institutionally embedded axiomatically most entrepreneurial endeavors will reproduce constraints rather than offer liberation from them".

Adding to the exploration of entrepreneuring as emancipation, Goss et al., (2011) introduce emotion as an important dimension of entrepreneurial agency and potential for emancipation and urge scholars to focus on the power rituals in interactions between the dominant and subordinate. The reproduction and challenge of power relations involves not only what individuals do and think but also what they feel. The level of emotional energy shapes an individual's motivation to challenge or accept a subordinate position. They argue that the more coercive the power rituals are, the more subordinates will be likely "to preserve their emotional energy through inertia and a restriction of their agency" towards emancipation (p. 216). Goss et al., also emphasize the dynamic of these interactions, and how interactions, over

time, can build agentic capacities and how variations in levels of emotional energy can explain under what conditions emancipatory actions can arise and be maintained.

Reviewing the literature on empowerment and emancipation in relation to women's entrepreneurship, Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) argue that these two concepts need to be disentangled. They suggest that empowerment is to be understood as the means for people to develop capacities through which they can act successfully within existing power structures while emancipation is to be defined as the subversion of existing power structures. Empowerment thereby lies on a more individual level while emancipation encompasses the desire to challenge structures of power within an institutional context. Alkhaled and Berglund draw on this distinction to analyze the life stories of women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia and Sweden. They find that although active in very different societal contexts, the stories of both groups of women emphasized a desire to break free from oppressive gender orders through entrepreneurship. However, this individual desire for empowerment was coupled with a desire to include others in a collective emancipatory process towards collective freedom. Empowerment was nevertheless not about grand achievements but rather being more in charge of their own life, gaining independence and a sense of freedom, within the context in which they lived. Alkhaled and Berglund emphasize that it nevertheless remains an empirical question if they achieve emancipation and that there is a risk that emancipation "turns into an (un)reachable object of desire, with a quest for even more individual empowerment and entrepreneurial activity" (p. 1), which excludes other activities that may promote change.

Women managers' conditions and strategies

It can be argued that women managers and women entrepreneurs face some similar conditions. Both groups are small in terms of numbers compared to men, and both are perceived as different in relation to the male entrepreneurial norm. Therefore, in the following, I present some insights from research into the token position of women managers and from the literature that focuses on how race and ethnicity affect the conditions of women managers.

The unequal conditions faced by women managers have been connected to the token position they hold within organizations. More than 40 years ago, Kanter (1977) studied the consequences related to being a numerical minority and developed a theory on tokenism that is still relevant today (Watkins et al., 2019). Tokens refers to social group members who are numerically underrepresented. Kanter distinguishes between tilted groups, in which the minority group makes up between 15% and 40% of the total, and skewed groups, in which the minority group constitutes less than 15% of the total and are labelled tokens. Kanter has identified three main effects of the token position: visibility, contrast, and role encapsulation. Firstly, because there are so few of them, tokens are more visible than their peers. Visibility entails experiencing performance pressure because tokens might have fears about making mistakes due to their performance being closely scrutinized and feel that they must prove that they are legitimate group members. At the same time, this is a balancing act because they do not want to be too visible and outshine their peers. Secondly, majority group members exaggerate the differences between themselves and the token through isolation and loyalty tests to ensure the token does not demand any changes. Thirdly, role encapsulation means that tokens are subject to stereotypical expectations which also affect their behavior. Therefore, according to Kanter (1977), tokens may engage in actions that are associated with their role and (majority) others' expectations, rather than behaviors that are consistent with their own performances. Kanter concluded that the extent to which the social identity group member is a token, shapes his or her experiences within an organization or a work group, which tend to be negative (ibid.).

Later studies have problematized this, showing that token experiences are more ambiguous and context dependent (Watkins et al., 2019). For example, Yoder (1991) found that tokenism is not only generated by numbers but is also linked to the gender order in society, and Williams (1992) argued that a glass escalator gives men career advantages in women-dominated organizations.

The unequal conditions faced by women in management are indeed a result of the male-gendered norms in management (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Schein, 1975; Wahl, 2014; Wajcman, 1998). Since men dominate the higher ranks in most organizations, and we tend to "think manager, think male," men are viewed as better qualified and more suitable for senior positions than women (Schein, 1975, 2007). This fuels homosocial reproduction among men, since male decision-makers will tend to prefer candidates who are similar to existing managers (Fawcett and Pringle, 2000; Holgersson, 2013; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

There exists a body of literature examining the strategies used by women in management to navigate their organizations and their careers, often labelled coping strategies. Women's coping strategies are the result of how they understand their situation and how they adapt their roles, practices, and relationships (Khilji and Pumroy, 2019) to be able to progress in a male context (Marshall, 1984). Much of this research focuses on the actions that women take to reconcile work with other roles and responsibilities and to gain support. For example, Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) explored coping strategies among executive women in relation to their families. To maintain a career–family balance and to advance their careers, these women developed multiple career–family-balance and career-advancement strategies, including personal support, professional support, life-course, and value-system strategies, such as the "ordering" of family and career, whether to have children, and negotiating spousal support.

Another example is the study by Khilji and Pumroy (2019) exploring coping strategies among US women engineers. They identified three strategies: conforming to play by the rules, negotiating to play around the rules, and defying to establish one's own rules. Conforming to play by the rules consisted of the women either stepping aside and accepting their role as a caregiver and mother, working long hours, or not getting married and/or not having children

in order not to compromise their careers. Negotiating to play around the rules involved women seeking spousal/family support and attempting to fit work around family. Defying to establish their own rules meant that (often younger) women decided not to blend in and instead set their own boundaries and rejected traditional expectations. Yet another example is provided by Tlaiss and Khanin (2023), who studied Saudi women senior managers' career strategies. They found two main strategies: Sailing Through, which consisted of enacting the culturally accepted manifestation of femininity; and Trailblazing, enacted by women who were not concerned about being culturally appropriate and instead emphasized professionalism and performance. As both these studies illustrate, women's strategies are dependent upon context, and range from conforming to challenging established norms.

There also exists a body of literature that is more focused on women's strategies of self (cf. Pacholok, 2009). This analyzes how women in management understand the gendered conditions they face, and how they shape their identities in relation to these conditions. For example, Wahl (1992) identified four strategies among women managers and professionals in Sweden by which they reconciled their self-esteem with the situation of belonging to a subordinate category, both at work and in society. These strategies are the gender-neutral strategy, the relative strategy, the external strategy, and the positive strategy. The gender-neutral strategy involves adhering to a gender-neutral description of reality in which gender is made irrelevant, thus closing the gap between male dominance and self-esteem. The relative strategy entails seeing male dominance as relative and entirely linked to the numbers of women and men. Since male dominance is assumed to cease when the number of women increases, self-esteem can be kept intact. However, the two most common strategies in Wahl's study were the external strategy and the positive strategy. The external strategy involves attributing phenomena to the outside world, rather than to one's own person, based on

one's minority situation and subordination. Explanations for discrimination are sought in the context, in the form of other people, or in the form of structures, so that self-esteem is not threatened. The positive strategy involves recognizing the personal advantages of the minority situation and subordination and using the positive aspects of this situation to keep self-esteem intact. Wahl argued that these strategies enable women to uphold their self-esteem and not regard themselves as subordinate.

Summary

My inquiry into the challenges and coping strategies of women entrepreneurs is guided by an understanding of entrepreneurship, gender, race, and ethnicity as socially constructed through both material and discursive practices. These practices take place within contexts in which gendered, racialized and ethnicized power relations condition women's entrepreneurship, shaping the challenges they face and the coping strategies they adopt. I have therefore based my analysis on studies that explore how women perceive and interpret their context and how they construct entrepreneurship and their entrepreneurial identity in relation to this context. My analysis has also been informed by studies of how women entrepreneurs cope with experiences of Othering and how they navigate discursively gendered, racialized, and ethnicized entrepreneurship norms. To deepen my understanding of the conditions experienced by women entrepreneurs and the strategies of self they employ, I have also drawn upon insights from research on tokenism and coping strategies among women managers. Following my view of women as active agents within a patriarchal context, my analysis and discussion acknowledge the tension between women's entrepreneurship as empowerment and as emancipation.

Chapter 3: Research Approach and Method

In this chapter, I present my research approach and research design including the process of collecting and analyzing data. In the closing section, I discuss the trustworthiness of my work and my ethical considerations.

Research approach

My research approach is informed by a social constructionist perspective. This implies specific assumptions about social reality and the ways in which we relate to and construct understandings of that reality. Social reality is assumed to be "an expression of relationship - to what has gone before and will come in the future" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 167). We are all relational beings, constantly becoming and emerging in relation to our context. Ontologically, social constructionism refutes the idea that we can "formulate true, objective facts and laws concerning human behavior" (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009, p. 30).

Being explicitly based in an interpretative tradition, social constructionism also assumes that there is no knowledge beyond individuals' subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of reality (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). In relation to research on entrepreneurship, this implies that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs exist through the interpretations made by individuals and groups in society. This also implies that I am not, as a researcher, detached from what is being studied and this will be explained in the following example by Fletcher's (2007) study. Fletcher (2007) exemplifies by arguing that entrepreneurs construct meanings around their entrepreneurial activities in relation to the researcher, shaping their accounts in relation to the specific situation they are in. Furthermore, Fletcher highlights that construction takes place after the interview when the researcher starts writing and thereby constructing an account. In this account, the researcher analyzes how the entrepreneur describes and creates meanings of the entrepreneurial process, and in order to understand this account, the researcher uses concepts and theories from the literature (ibid.). It is therefore important for a researcher to be transparent with the research process. In my analyses, I must also be

attentive to the social context of entrepreneurial practices and focus on exploring how entrepreneurial activities are constructed between individuals through social interactions in relation to their context (Fletcher, 2007).

According to Lindgren and Packendorff (2009), a social constructionist perspective has implications for our understanding of entrepreneurship. According to a social constructionist perspective, both individuals and collectives define themselves, and are defined by others in relation to norms and expectations on how to behave and think. When doing and thinking differently, people combine these norms and expectations with new ideas and perspectives. In view of this, Lindgren and Packendorff argue the entrepreneurial process can be seen as boundary work which means that it involves both identifying and challenging, and sometimes even breaking institutionalized patterns. This requires that the entrepreneurial process influences, and includes, other individuals and organizations in society. Entrepreneurship is thereby seen to be in constant becoming which can lead to pluralism and emancipation (ibid.).

Research design

To address my research question on what challenges women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds in Sweden perceive and what coping strategies they employ, I chose a qualitative research design within a social constructionist paradigm (Fletcher, 2007; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). Qualitative methods are suitable when exploring the accounts of individual women entrepreneurs and examining social processes, for example processes of constructing entrepreneurial identities (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Stead, 2017). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs. Another reasons to choose semi-structured interviews is that the format provides the possibility to let the respondent to elaborate on different areas that arises during the interview (Collis and Hussey, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). I analyzed the data following an abductive process (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) which meant that I analyzed the data iteratively going back and forth between the data and the literature. Regarding research design, the first step was formulating the research problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and research question. I then selected the research

method. The next phase involved designing the interview questions and recruiting participants for the study. Following that, I conducted interviews. The third step consisted of analyzing and coding the data. I then began writing up the results while iterating between the empirical findings and literature. After drawing conclusions, I mapped out the thesis structure. As I employed an abductive approach, the process involved continual movement between the data and relevant theory.

Participants

I wanted to conduct interviews with women entrepreneurs who represented a diverse range of industries, backgrounds, education levels, professions, and ethnicities. My goal was to capture a wide variety of challenges faced by entrepreneurs beyond just those common in the startup phase. Therefore, I sought to interview women running well-established businesses.

I began my search for participants in the Stockholm area for two key reasons. First, it was most convenient given that I live in Stockholm. However, Stockholm is also Sweden's capital city, which attracts many investors and businesses from across the country and around the world. As such, Stockholm offered access to entrepreneurs working in diverse industries and with varied experiences. Its large population also improved my chances of finding qualified participants who met my criteria for diversity.

I set out to find participants using a snowball sampling strategy. It could be argued that women entrepreneurs, especially those with a non-Swedish background, are a hidden group or “rare population”, that is hard to find and get access to because they are so few, or possibly an overly-exposed group that receives much attention because they are one of very few and therefore do not wish to become more visible by participating in a research project on women entrepreneurs. Moreover, I anticipated that it could be difficult to get women entrepreneurs to accept to be interviewed out of lack of time or because the topic of challenges could be perceived as sensitive. Either way, finding and accessing “hidden groups”, either stigmatized and marginalized groups or elite groups is often difficult and one of the most common methods used to access such groups is by adopting snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling

is a sampling procedure where the researcher accesses informants by receiving contact information provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). This procedure has a repetitive and accumulative dynamic to it where informants put the researcher in contact with other informants, and the researcher contacts these new potential informants who may refer the researcher to other informants, and so on, hopefully initiating a "snowball" effect (ibid.). For long, snowball sampling has been seen as an auxiliary procedure to be used when other procedures to access informants have failed. However, Noy (2008) argues that snowball sampling is a particularly informative procedure when studying social systems and networks. In this present study, I have not set out to study the social systems or networks among women entrepreneurs, but it could be a subject for further inquiry in the future.

Snowball sampling has been criticized for numerous weaknesses, in particular, selection bias because respondents may select new potential respondents according to their own personal bias; the diversity of subjects is limited to the respondents' networks; and validity (Woodley and Lockhard, 2016). Taken together, this is seen to undermine the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, as Woodley and Lockhard (2016) argue building on Sydor (2013, p. 36), "biased information is better than none". If we want to gain knowledge about hidden groups and their conditions, then these weaknesses should not deter from using snowball sampling. Moreover, I have not set out to produce generalizable results, but instead of producing results that are transferable (Miles et al., 2013).

I initiated the snowball procedure by getting in touch with an organization provides support and training for women entrepreneurs in the Stockholm area. The organization put me in touch with six participants. I was also introduced to a couple of participants by women that I met at events for women entrepreneurs. In addition, I used my own network of friends and colleagues to find participants. I also found established women entrepreneurs by searching in Swedish media, and despite difficulties in finding their contact details, I managed to contact several of them. Unfortunately, they all declined.

In total, 21 women entrepreneurs agreed to participate in my study. The list of the participants is presented below in Table 3.1. They are active in a range of

different industries and have different ethnic backgrounds. Most of the women had a higher education, were married, and had children. To protect their integrity, the participants have been anonymized. Each participant has been assigned a code that has been documented on a code list that is stored separately from the code-numbered interview files. I am responsible for the code-list and only person to have access to this list.

I have grouped the participants based on their ethnic backgrounds and color and refer to these categories as follows:
Swedish white women are women who are white and were born and raised in Sweden and whose parents were born in Sweden.
Swedish women of color are women of color who were born or raised in Sweden and whose parents were born abroad.
Immigrant women of color are women of color with an ethnic minority background who were born abroad and moved to Sweden as adults.
Immigrant white women are white women with an ethnic minority background who were born abroad and moved to Sweden as adults.

It is worth noticing here that the white Swedish women and Swedish women of color spoke Swedish fluently because they were born in Sweden and attended elementary education in Sweden. On the other hand, immigrant women of color and white immigrant women spoke Swedish with an accent or not speak it very well at all. The Swedish women of color, immigrant women of color and white immigrant women included in this study can be viewed as living with two cultures: their ethnic minority culture and the Swedish culture.

Table 3.1: List of participants and their background

Women	**Education**	**Ethnic background**	**Color**	**Married/ Children**	**Type of business**	**Profession**	No.
SC1	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	Yes/Yes	Law	Lawyer	1
IC1	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Fashion	Designer	2
SC2	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Health	Nurse	3
IC2	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Health	Consultant	4

SC3	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Law	Lawyer	5
IC3	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Beauty	Hairdresser	6
SW1	No higher education	Swedish	White	Yes/ Yes	Interior design	Designer	7
SW2	No higher education	Swedish	White	Yes/ Yes	Photography	Photographer	8
SW3	Higher education	Swedish	White	Yes/ Yes	Textile	Designer	9
SW4	Higher education	Swedish	White	Yes/ Yes	Marketing	Consultant	10
SW5	Higher education	Swedish	White	Yes/ Yes	Law	Lawyer	11
SC4	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Investment	Investor	12
SC5	No higher education	Swedish	Of Color	Yes/No	Marketing	Consultant	13
SC6	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	No/No	IT	Engineer	14
IW1	Higher education	Ethnic minority	White	Yes/ Yes	Photography	Photographer	15
IC4	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Health	Engineer	16
IC5	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	Yes/ Yes	Marketing	Consultant	17
IC6	Higher education	Ethnic minority	Of Color	No/No	IT	Designer	18
IW2	Higher education	Ethnic minority	White	Yes/ Yes	Photography	Photographer	19
IW3	Higher education	Ethnic minority	White	Yes/ Yes	Fashion	Designer	20
SC7	Higher education	Swedish	Of Color	No/No	IT	Engineer	21

Interviews

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was prepared drawing on the conceptual framework developed by Azmat (2013) based on an overview of studies of challenges that women entrepreneurs face. The questions were divided into the following sections: background information, business profile, motivation to start a business, institutional factors, family support, work-life balance, education and profession, role models, and gender challenges. Questions regarding the women's relation to entrepreneurship, if the identified as entrepreneurs and how they presented themselves in professional settings were included since research has highlighted that women entrepreneurs shape their

entrepreneurial identity in different ways. Questions about expectations and plans for the future were asked as a way to capture ambitions and dreams related to their venture which can also provide insights into participants perceptions of entrepreneurship. The interview guide is presented in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Interview guide

Background How old are you? Do you identify as a woman? Do you have a Swedish background (that is born in Sweden with a least one parent born in Sweden)? What is your living situation (partner/children)? What education do you have? What education do your parents have? Any work experience that can be relevant?
Business profile In what sector would you place your company? In what year did you start your company?
Motivation to start your company How come you start your own company? How did you get the idea? What was the motivation to start your company? What is your goal with your business?
Institutional factors (registering a company) Do you remember any barriers in starting or running your business now than then? How did you handle these barriers? Do you remember what was helpful when you started your business? What about the financing? How do you finance your business? Did you take any training courses before you started to get the skills you need for your business? Did you have a mentor when you started? Did you take any courses provided by the government authorities or other organizations?
Family support (parents, siblings, partner, children) Did your family support you when you first started your business? In what way? Today, in what way does your family affect you as a business owner? What experience did you learn from your family that helped you in your business?
Work – life balance How do you balance work and other parts of your life?

Education and profession
What about your education and profession? In what way has it affected your choice to establish your company? Do you identify yourself with your profession, e.g., as a lawyer, nurse, teacher, etc. or do you primarily identify yourself as an entrepreneur? Why?
Role model
Do you have any role models in your life, from your family or outside the family, someone who inspired you to start your own business?
Relation to entrepreneurship
How do you describe yourself in a few words? How would you present yourself in a professional setting? How do you identify yourself, as an entrepreneur or according to your profession? How do you describe yourself as an entrepreneur?
Gender challenges
Being a woman, has it affected you in any way in your business? If so, in what way? In your view, are there any challenges being a woman and having your own company? How did you cope with challenges related to gender (being a woman) in your company? In your view, are there any advantages being a woman and having your own company?
Future plans and expectations
What about your future plans other than what you said so far? Do you feel pressure to be successful? Do you want to add anything?

In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 women entrepreneurs. The interviews took place in Stockholm, Sweden, between April 2022 and March 2023. All interviews were conducted with a single interviewee (one to one), except the interview with SC7 and SC6 who wanted to conduct the interview together as they established their business together and worked together as business partners. Most of the interviews were held mainly in English, only two in Swedish. This is because I am more fluent in English than in Swedish. Most participants spoke English as a first or second language, which is why they agreed to do the interview in English. Only three women preferred to have the interview in Swedish as they did not speak English fluently. Most of the participants were fluent in Swedish, except three women who did not speak Swedish. I find that I got all the information I needed from the interviews held both in the English and Swedish. Being able to speak and understand both languages English and Swedish has been valuable for me

during the interviews and the data analysis process. During the interviews, women could express themselves in Swedish when they could not find a word in English, and it was not a problem for me as I could understand Swedish codes and slang after spending many years in Sweden. However, in order to use the transcribed interviews in Swedish in the writing process, I translated the interview transcripts from Swedish to English using a web-based translation tool.

I was an attentive listener, had eye contact, nodded my head, and gave attention to the participants throughout the interviews. I paused and asked them to explain more if there were issues not clear to me during the interviews. I asked for more examples and explanations in some cases when I needed more information to understand what they were talking about. All the interviews were characterized by a formal but friendly dialogue, and I felt there was respect and appreciation from both sides, the participant, and the researcher. The interviews lasted around 60 to 80 minutes each.

Most of the interviews were conducted face to face which gave me the opportunity to also observe the participant's body language, facial expressions, and voice tones which were important to help me understand their reactions, such as enthusiasm, discomfort, or confusion (Bryman, 2012). However, in the interviews that have been conducted via Zoom, I could only see the head and upper part of the body and that has limited my observations of the full body language. Eight interviews took place on the premises of the participants' companies and five interviews in a café in Stockholm. I noticed that making the effort and going to their offices was important for the participants. I could sense from what they said and their facial expressions that they were proud that a researcher valued their opinions and made the effort to meet them face to face. Thirteen interviews were conducted face to face, while around eight interviews were conducted via Zoom when the participants could not meet face to face. Both the face-to-face and Zoom interviews gave me the information I needed for my research, and I got well-connected with the participants. Even though meeting via Zoom was more efficient and more practical (saved time and effort), however, the face-to-face interviews gave stronger connection and better communication with the participants. That is because meeting face-to-face gives the participants more relaxing and free space to express their

emotions and they could say things before or after the interview while I am not recording. It was a chance for me as a researcher to observe their expressions, body language, and gestures which helped me in the analysis and data interpretation process. When it was face-to-face interviews, we could extend the time of the interview and talk longer in some cases if the participants wanted, however, it was not the same with the interviews via Zoom which has more limited time.

Before the interview began, I provided information about how the interview would be conducted and how the data would be handled. I gave the participant the opportunity to read the information document and answered any questions. I then asked for consent and the participant signed the consent form (please see Appendix 2 for information leaflet and form of consent). Only audio was recorded except for interviews conducted digitally when also video was recorded, but only the audio file was saved and transcribed.

Based on what the women said, their facial and bodily expressions, I think that one of the reasons for agreeing to be interviewed was that the participants were happy to see research focused on women entrepreneurs and their concerns. Some of them wanted their voices to be heard (especially by the government or decision-makers) because they were struggling with different issues such as gender inequalities, discrimination, or lack of financial support. Some of them also participated out of curiosity and because they wanted to share their story. A couple of participants expressed that the interview had helped them reflect on their entrepreneurial journey and their life.

I believe the fact that I am not white and not originally Swedish myself helped some of the participants who were not white or belonged to an ethnic minority to connect to me and share their feelings and experiences that they may possibly not have done if I had been white and Swedish. I believe sharing some Otherness with the interviewed women enabled them to talk to me about their perceptions of Swedish society and Swedish people. On the other hand, the fact that the participants could see that I am not a white Swedish may also have limited their participation in terms of sharing their perceptions about the social structures in their ethnic minority group. I think they would have to

share more of that kind of information with Swedes or Europeans who do not share the same context as they might be less suspicious about being judged.

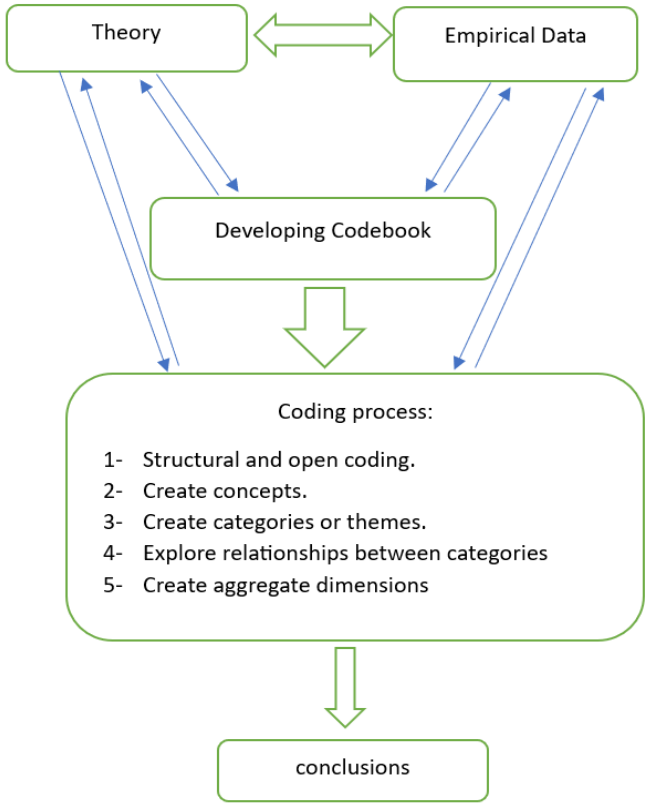
Although I did not conduct straightforward life story interviews, the interview questions encouraged the participants to share stories about and from their life. I asked questions about the participants' background, education, profession, and family situation, as well as questions about becoming and being a woman entrepreneur. Many times, these stories were very emotional. I could sense this by what the women said but also how they said it, how they emphasized certain aspects, the tone of their voice, their facial expressions, and gestures. In fact, I was very unprepared when I encountered such strong emotions in my first interview. I had imagined a very factual interview and came away being very moved by the conversation. From then on, I paid much more attention not only to what was said but also to all the other "non-transcribable features" of the interview (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 442).

Analyzing the data

My approach to data analysis was abductive (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), which means that I embarked upon my exploration of women entrepreneurs' challenges and coping strategies with an existing theoretical understanding of these phenomena. The analysis of the data was an iterative process of going back and forth between the data and extant literature to see if I could develop my analysis further drawing on this literature, or if new concepts or conceptual relation needed to be made in order to better account for the empirical data and answer the research question.

After finishing the data collection process and having prepared the verbatim transcripts, I began the coding process. An illustration of this process based on the work of Diaz García and Welter (2013) is found below in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Illustration of the coding process



I conducted the data analysis in two steps to ensure a careful coding process. Firstly, the data was coded manually. Then, I used NVivo coding software to carry out the coding process of the interview transcripts and create themes. This process included the creation of a codebook and using analytic memos to document the process of coding. The first stage of the process of coding began with attribute coding, which was utilized for capturing demographic information about respondents and their businesses such as age, profession, educational level, type of business, ethnic background, and color. The second step of coding included coding each interview into general topics or themes (structural codes). This coding was guided by the interview questions that built

on the framework suggested by Azmat (2013) which helped me map the challenges that were mentioned in the interviews. Open coding was used in the third stage to prioritize the participant's voices (Saldana, 2013). Table 3.2 below shows an example of the codebook.

Table 3.2: The codebook

Attribute coding			
Code name	**Nickname**	**Type**	**Description**
Age	AGE	Structural	Founder's age
Ethnic Background	ETHNIC	Structural	Founder's ethnic background/ origin
Color	COLOR	Structural	White or of color
Type of Business	BUS	Structural	The sector in which they operate
Profession	PROF	Structural	Founder's profession
Education	EDUC	Structural	Founder, highest level of education

Open and structural coding			
Code name	**Nickname**	**Type**	**Description**
Motivation to start a business	MOTIV	Structural	This code applies when participant describes their motivation to start a business
Financial challenges	FINANC	Structural	This code applies when participant describes the financial challenges
Cultural challenges	CULTUR	Structural	This code applies when participant describes the how they adapt to the culture
Gender challenges	GENDER	Structural	This code applies when participant describes the challenges in relation to gender
Ethnic challenges	ETHNIC	Structural	This code applies when participant describes the challenges in relation to ethnicity

Network	NETWORK	Structural	This code applies when participant describes how they created business network
Role model	ROL-MODL	Structural	This code applies when participant describes their
Work - life balance challenge	BALANCE	Structural	This code applies when participant describes their
Future plan	F- PLAN	Structural	
Being excluded	EXCLUDED	Open	This code applies when participant describes their experience of being excluded.
Lack of support	SUPPORT	Open	This code applies when participant discusses their view of having lack of support for from the government or community.
Being treated differently	DIFFER	Thematic	This code applies when participant talk about their experience of being treated different or not equal.
Gendered entrepreneurship discourse	GEDERD-ENT	Thematic	Code applies when describing entrepreneurship discourses based on how women entrepreneurs perceive their conditions as minority
Othering Process	OTHERING	Thematic	Code applies when describing women entrepreneurs' perceptions on how they have been treated differently and excluded
Awareness and disappointment	AWAR-DISAP	Thematic	Code applies when describing women entrepreneurs expressed emotions regarding inequalities in society or being subject to discrimination
Assimilation strategy	ASSIMIL	Thematic	Code based on how women entrepreneurs describe how they adapt to dominant entrepreneurial norm
Positive strategy	POSITIVE	Thematic	Code based on how women entrepreneurs emphasize positive aspects of being different and

			discursively framing disadvantages as advantages
Ambiguity strategy	AMBIGUITY	Thematic	Code based on how women entrepreneurs switch identities or adopting a hybrid identity when describing themselves as entrepreneurs or when chose to ignore the problem of inequalities.
Change strategy	CHANGE	Thematic	Code applies based on how women entrepreneurs acknowledge inequalities in society and see themselves as change agents.
Navigating power structures	POWR-STR	Aggregate dimensions	Code applies based on the analysis of the challenges and coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs, and based on the theories related to the concepts of empowerment and emancipation
Pursuing their passion	PASSION	Aggregate dimensions	Code applies based on the analysis of the challenges and coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs, and based on the theories related to the concepts of empowerment, emancipation and freedom
Claiming their worth	WORTH	Aggregate dimensions	Code applies based on the analysis of the challenges and coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs, and based on the theories related to the concepts of empowerment and emancipation
Desire for belonging	BELONG	Aggregate dimensions	Code applies based on the analysis of the challenges and coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs, and based on the theories related to the concepts of belonging

The fourth stage featured second-cycle coding, which involved organizing codes into wider categories and themes. This coding was guided by my theoretical understanding of the conditions that women entrepreneurs and managers face and their coping strategies. The overall process of coding was iterative, switching back and forth between literature and empirical data, and making adjustments to the codebook when needed. It was completed in stages over the course of several months.

When coding, I engaged in interpretations of the participants experiences and actions. These are my interpretations, and I am aware that these are not the only interpretations possible. I also kept in mind that accounts are seldom entirely coherent but most often ambiguous. I have therefore been open to several interpretations of what was said and listened for different voices in the participants' accounts.

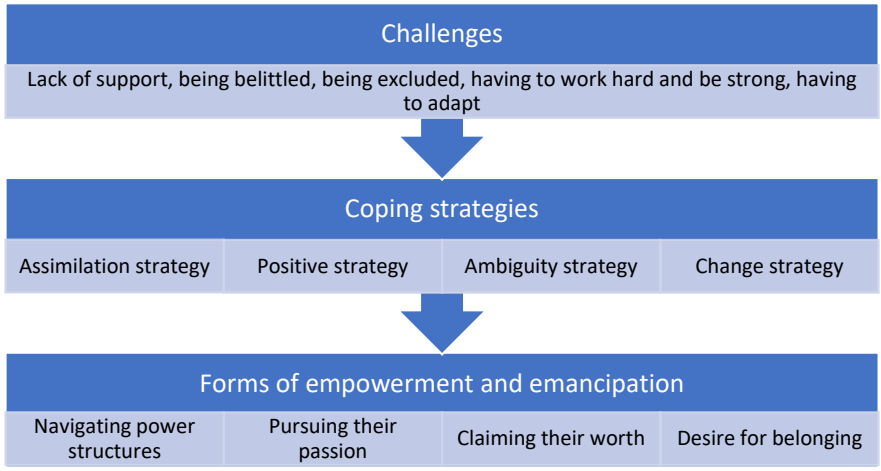
The writing process started after having analyzed a significant amount of empirical data and engaged with the literature. In order to be visible and make the reader aware that the findings are the result of my interpretations, I chose to write in first person and not in third person which in my opinion gives the text a "detached" impression.

The writing process was far from straightforward, especially since my research followed an abductive approach. I went back and forth between the empirical data and my theoretical framework, writing continuously. Throughout the writing process, I was in close contact with my supervisors, discussing my interpretations and conclusions. First, I attempted to write short life stories of the interviewed women, but I chose not to include them in the final text as I feared the descriptions would compromise their anonymity, particularly the immigrant women and women of color. Instead, I chose to present the participants in table 3.1.

In chapter 5, I report on the results from my first order analysis in which I more inductively identified different themes. I have therefore also chosen to report these results in chapter 5 without interpreting the results in relation to theory. I chose to include quotes that I found particularly illustrative for the different themes. These quotes are all based on the audio-recorded interviews.

Writing chapter 6 and 7 consisted of further intense dialogue between my first and second order coding and my theoretical framework, in particular the literature on gendered conditions for entrepreneurship, women's coping strategies, and empowerment and emancipation through entrepreneurship. Below, Figure 3.4 provides a visual representation of the steps in my analysis.

Figure 3.4: My analytical steps



Self-reflexivity

In line with my social constructionist perspective, I see knowledge as situated and there is no "view from nowhere" (Haraway (1988, P. 581). I have therefore made considerable efforts to practice reflexivity throughout my work with this thesis. As Wasserfall (1993, P. 24-25) argues, "reflexivity is a position of a certain kind of praxis where there is a continuous checking on the accomplishment of understanding". As a researcher, I try to become more aware of the process of knowledge construction and how my background, beliefs, and feelings influence the research process. Not only does it impact how I am positioned by the women I have interviewed, but also "how an (un)articulated "we" is constructed through the course of research [...] partially defined by the extent to which the participant (dis)identifies with the researcher as well as the community with which s/he is supposedly associated

with" (Mulinari, 2005 in Farahani, 1010). In fact, several of the ethnic minority women of color started to refer to themselves as immigrants in the interview and included me in that group by for example saying, "us immigrants". I acknowledge that many times throughout my research process, I have found that the conversations with the ethnic minority women of color resonated with me both emotionally and intellectually (cf. Farahani, 2010). I found that the encounter with the white Swedish women was slightly different. In these interviews, I felt that I was positioned as an outsider or as an immigrant or foreigner. At the same time, white Swedish women appeared to feel comfortable sharing their experiences about gender challenges possibly because it was a woman to a woman situation, in which we shared the same gender. From that perspective, I felt as an insider.

Thus, I have shifted between different insider and outsider positions throughout the research process, (Farahani, 2010). At times, I have chosen to be an insider to gain the trust of some of the participants in my research or if the participants themselves put me in the position of an insider, I started to act as an insider. Although this has generated interesting insights into these women's experiences, I have been careful to reflect upon how this may have affected my interpretations. With other participants, I have remained in an outsider position (cf. Farahani, 2010) always listening carefully and asking for clarifications. I have also engaged in many discussions about my interpretations with my two white Swedish supervisors.

As Farahani (2010) argues, self-reflexivity is very important to help us as researchers think about how we construct our experience, interpretation, and questions in research. Self-reflexivity also makes researchers recognize their role as both object and subject (Farahani, 2010). Therefore, reflecting on myself, my background in Sweden, and my journey during my doctoral studies in Sweden, has helped me to see more clearly how my background may have affected my interpretations and the outcome of my research. In order to bring both the researcher and the research participant into the same space, as Farahani (2010) writes, and give readers a chance to evaluate them as "situated actors", I wish here to share some background information about myself.

I am originally from the Sultanate of Oman, a country located on the south-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula in Asia, which is a monarchy characterized by a patriarchal system. My native language is Arabic, and I have had English as a second language since childhood. I started to learn English in elementary school and all my higher education was in English. I obtained my bachelor's degree in business administration specializing in management from Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and an MBA from Athens University of Economics & Business in Greece. After my MBA, I worked as a lecturer at a university in Oman where I taught management and entrepreneurship courses. It when I organized different events to help students start a business that my interest in entrepreneurship turned into a passion. Following this, I opened my own company and hosted events, for the first time in Oman, related to entrepreneurship, for example, Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW) and Start-up Weekend in collaboration with global organizations from the US. These experiences have been valuable for me during my doctoral studies as they have helped me understand the entrepreneurship discourse and entrepreneurial processes.

It was a scholarship to pursue my doctoral studies from the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman that brought me to Sweden in 2012. During my years in Sweden, I have learned the Swedish language and have it as my third language after attending different Swedish language courses including the courses called "Swedish as a second language" (SVA 1,2,3) which gives the qualification to study at the university level in Swedish. Mastering the Swedish language played a significant role in helping me understand the Swedish context (such as cultural, political, and economic aspects) as it gave me access to a lot of information offered by Swedish media (newspapers and TV) and attending events that were conducted in Swedish. Above all, it helped me to interact and communicate freely with Swedish people, young and old, who could not speak fluent English language which in turn increased my understanding of Swedish culture and lifestyle. During my time in Swedish, English and Swedish have been my main language of communication and I seldom speak my mother tongue, Arabic.

Throughout my doctoral studies in Sweden and after learning the Swedish language, I have attended some events at IFS (Internationella Företagare i

Sverige, International Business Owners in Sweden) and Stockholm Business Development, these two organizations belonged to Almi Företagspartner AB but do not exist today. Both events covered issues such as helping people from ethnic minorities to start a business or to develop their business ideas. I have also attended events and accelerator programs organized by the Ester Foundation that focus on helping women with ethnic minority backgrounds in Sweden to develop their businesses. These events gave me insights about the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Sweden and specifically in Stockhom.

Being in Sweden for almost twelve years has given me a sense of how it may feel for those who immigrate to another country and live in a new context including finding ways to adapt to the new culture. I can reflect on this as a way of finding ourselves and learning more about ourselves. Living in a new context gives me the chance to reflect on my life and the different ways of living and having different views on things (here comparing Oman and Sweden) which I describe as a complex and far from an easy process. In fact, I would describe it as a struggle with oneself until one day one may reach the peace to discover who is s/he, what one wants, and where to belong. I call it the process of adaptation where the new self is born, or, in other words, a process of identity construction where a new or mixed identity is born. Going through this process played helped me understand the processes that women with ethnic minority backgrounds or of color in my research had gone through, especially since I am not considered white myself.

In addition, I have learnt much from my experience of coming from a context in which with much room for manoeuvre to a context in which I am seen as the Other. In Oman, I belong to a privileged category, and I am even considered white. This has given me access to all the resources and networks I have needed to pursue my dreams and ambitions. In Oman, I never felt discriminated or treated unequally due to my ethnic background or color. Although the context was patriarchal, I felt free and able to achieve everything I wanted. I felt like I had wings and could fly high up in the sky. I may have encountered some cultural barriers, but as part of the Norm, it was always easy to find ways to pass them. This was however not the case for me in Sweden. It has not been easy not to belong to the Norm, especially as I am not considered white in Sweden. I have not had access to networks and resources, and I have not been

able to achieve things related to my career. I have many times felt as if doors are closed in my face when I have tried to achieve something. I have felt as if my wings have been taken away and not being able to fly anymore. Not being part of the Norm also meant being treated differently. This experience has helped me to understand the participants who went through similar process as I and has helped me in the analysis and interpretation process of my data.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of my study, the credibility, dependability, and transferability of my findings must be discussed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to having confidence in how the data and analysis address the intended focus. In order to find a variety of challenges and coping strategies faced by women entrepreneurs, I chose participants with diverse backgrounds who operate in various industries. Throughout the interviews, I continuously ensured that I correctly understood each participant and asked follow-up questions or requested additional clarification when issues they discussed were unclear. I carefully read and re-examined my interview data with an open mind to avoid inadvertently excluding any relevant information. I have also presented the results from my analysis in a way that is close to the data and used illustrative quotes from the interview transcripts. Furthermore, I discussed my interpretations at length with my supervisors.

Dependability refers to considering the degree to which data changes over time and alterations made in the researcher's decisions during the analysis process. I addressed issues of dependability by keeping detailed records regarding the data collection process, in addition to ensuring that interviews were conducted with multiple participants. I have also audio recorded all the interviews and transcribed them to ensure the quality of the data that I can refer to at any time if needed. Additionally, I coded the data on my own and sought feedback on the initial findings from my supervisors.

Transferability refers to the possibilities of transferring the findings to other contexts with other participants (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). The researcher or scientist facilitates the transferability judgment by other users by clearly

describing the context, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection process, and process of analysis, as well as through a rich presentation of the findings along with appropriate quotations (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). I have therefore described the Swedish context, how I went about selecting the participants and presenting them as far as possible without compromising their anonymity. I have presented my findings providing descriptions of the themes identified in the data and including illustrative quotes.

Reflexivity refers to the process of critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher as well as the relationship of the researcher with his/her research (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Reflexivity entails that I acknowledge and reflect upon the effects that I as a researcher have on the participants' narratives, that I am indeed part of co-creating the data, that my interpretations are influenced by my social position, that I am therefore part of constructing knowledge and that this knowledge is situated (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006). To support my reflexive practice, I always went back to my original data source, and discussed my observations, interpretations and conclusions with colleagues and my supervisors. I have also included a section in this chapter in which I share information about myself and reflect on how my background may have impacted my data collection and interpretations.

Ethical considerations

As this study involved processing sensitive personal data, an ethical review application was submitted to and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Measures to protect participants' integrity and their right to protection of their private lives were taken. One such measure was to make sure informed consent was obtained. Participants were given the opportunity to read an information document with information about how the interview would be conducted and how the data would be handled before signing a consent form (please see Appendix 2 for information leaflet and form of consent). I have also made sure that all information is recorded, stored, and transmitted in such a way that individuals cannot be identified from the outside. This involved securing anonymity of the participants and their personal or business information. Participants have been anonymized in the

analysis and presentation of data in both scientific and popular science publications. Any interview quotes have been edited when necessary to minimize the risk of identification. The data has also been stored safely. The participants were assigned codes that have been documented on a code list that is stored separately from the code-numbered interview files. I am responsible for the code-list and the only person to have access to this list. Each data collection session is provided with an indication of time, location, and code. I have kept copies of the audio recordings, spreadsheets, and notes that I created during the analysis process. All documents have been catalogued and stored in the secure shared area OneDrive that is provided by the university (KTH Royal Institute of Technology) and only I have access to the material. After completion of the project, the material will be archived for 10 years, after which the material will be destroyed.

Chapter 4: The Swedish Setting

This study focuses on understanding the perceptions of women entrepreneurs of the challenges they face and the ways they find to cope with such challenges. The context in which these women practice their business affects how they deal with the challenges. Therefore, it is important to shed light on the Swedish context within which the women entrepreneurs in this study run their businesses. This chapter provides a brief overview of the Swedish context focusing on the labor market and gender equality policies, women entrepreneurs, and government support for entrepreneurs.

The Swedish labor market

Today, women and men are almost equally represented on the Swedish labor market. In 2023, the employment rate in Sweden reached 67.6% for women and 68.9% for men, and the unemployment rate was 4.9% for men and 4.7% for women, according to Statistics Sweden (2023). However, unemployment is higher among foreign-born people in Sweden than among those born in Sweden. The rate of unemployed foreign-born women was 16.5%, which is higher than the rate of unemployed foreign-born men, at 14.6%, as Table 4.1 shows (Statistics Sweden, 2023). Moreover, the unemployment rate of foreign-born women (16.5%) is also higher than the unemployment rate of native-born Swedish women (4.5%), as statistics from Statistics Sweden (2023) in Table 4.1 shows.

Table 4.1: Employment rate, unemployment rate, and participation rate for foreign-born and native men and women (Statistics Sweden, 2023).

	Men		**Women**		**Total**	
	Foreign-born	Native-born	Foreign-born	Native-born	Foreign-born	Native-born
Employment rate	71.2%	81.2%	60.3%	80.0%	65.8%	80.7%

Unemployment rate	14.6%	4.5%	16.5%	4.5%	15.5%	4.5%
Participation rate	83.4%	85.0%	72.3%	84.0%	77.9%	84.5%

The majority of women, 59%, work full-time, which can be compared to 73% of employed men who work full-time (Statistics Sweden, 2022). However, the labor market is segregated. Several key areas in the public sector, such as health care and education, are dominated by women, while many industries are dominated by men (Statistics Sweden, 2022). Furthermore, women are underrepresented in management positions, even in the public sector where women constitute a majority of all employees but only 67% of all managers. In the private sector, which is dominated by men, 33% of managers are women (Statistics Sweden, 2022).

The majority of women, 59%, work full-time, which can be compared to 73% of employed men who work full-time (Statistics Sweden, 2022). However, the labor market is segregated. Several key areas in the public sector, such as health care and education, are dominated by women, while the private sector is dominated by men. Moreover, according to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (2023), in 2020, 67% of women work in women-dominated occupations and 64% of men work in occupations dominated by men. The proportion differs between those born in Sweden and those born abroad. 56% of foreign-born men work in male-dominated occupations compared to 66% of men born in Sweden. Instead, foreign-born men are more likely to work in women-dominated occupations or occupations with an even gender distribution. Among women, the difference is smaller, with 67% of women born in Sweden and 69% of foreign-born women work in women-dominated occupations (ibid.). Furthermore, women are underrepresented in management positions, even in the public sector where women constitute a majority of all employees but only 67% of all managers. In the private sector, which is dominated by men, 33% of managers are women (Statistics Sweden, 2022).

The presence of immigrant women on the labor market in Sweden increased after WWII. Women mainly worked in low-valued jobs (and at the bottom of

the labor-market hierarchy) such as cleaning, caring, and cooking (Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012). At that time, labor-market participation among immigrant women was greater than that of Swedish women (Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012). That changed during the 1980s, despite the fact that the number of immigrants in Sweden had increased, including refugees and their families, which implied an increase in the number of immigrant women who remained outside the labor market (Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012). During the 1990s, a combination of an increase in the number of immigrants, especially refugees, and a long-term deep recession, reduced immigrant women's participation in the labor market, pushing them into insecure, short-term employment, mostly in the service sector, or outside the labor market altogether (Johansson, 2000). The position of immigrant women in the low-education service sector, including elderly care, in the Swedish labor market can be characterized as "inclusive subordination" (Johansson, 2000). The recession of the 1990s was followed by changes in the organization and financing of the Swedish public-sector service facilities that has affected the healthcare sector (Johansson, 2000). Most of the employees within the healthcare system were immigrant or native-born women, who were viewed as an economic problem rather than resources (Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012). At the same time, the deregulation of the public sector and privatization of the provision of welfare services generated potential opportunities for women to set up a business because they often worked in this sector and had relevant education, training, and knowledge (Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012).

Gender equality policies

Sweden is often seen as a gender egalitarian country (Holmquist and Sundin, 2021). Indeed, Sweden consistently ranks as one of the most gender egalitarian countries in the world in global comparisons such as the Gender Development Index (GDI) produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2024), the Global Gender Gap report produced by the World Economic Forum (2024).

Gender equality has been on the political agenda for a long time. According to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (2024) website, "equality between women and men is a fundamental constitutional norm and an explicit policy

objective in Sweden […] The ultimate aim of Swedish gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life." As part of the development of the Swedish welfare state based on social democratic values, women's increased presence on the was promoted through a dual-earning model, state-financed childcare, and entanglement between women's and labor market needs (Giritli Nygren et al., 2018). Although this has improved women's situation in many ways, scholars argue that the Swedish welfare state has to some extent replaced private patriarchy where women are dependent on individual men with public patriarchy in which women are dependent on the welfare state (Giritli Nygren et al., 2018). This model has since the 1980s shifted into a different model often labelled market patriarchy with more neo-liberal ideology characteristics emphasizing obligations and duties rather than rights (Giritli Nygren et al., 2018). Scholars argue that this ongoing process of neo-liberalization affects the state's ability to promote gender equality (Elomäki and Koskinen Sandberg, 2020). Women now receive less support from the public sector and are instead encouraged to become entrepreneurs (Holmqvist and Sundin, 2021).

Scholars have, however, for long contested the woman friendliness of the earlier Swedish model, emphasizing that Sweden and the other Nordic countries, are characterized by the so-called Nordic paradox. This paradox consists of the simultaneous existence of relatively high degrees of gender equality in terms of strong gender equality policies, support for parents in combining work and family responsibilities, strong representation of women in politics and on the labor market, and persistent gender inequalities such gender pay gaps, vertical and horizontal gender segregated labor market and women's continued responsibility for unpaid social reproductive work (e.g., Borchorst and Siim, 2002, 2008). Moreover, research shows that the Swedish gender equality model presumes that all women share the same interests, and these interests are those of white middle-class heterosexual women with young children (e.g., Borchorst and Siim, 2002; Borchorst et al., 2012).

An image of Swedish "exceptionalism" has developed over time. That is, Sweden is today understood, by others and its citizens, as a country morally superior when it comes to ideals such as modernity, democracy, and equality (Martinsson et al., 2016). This Swedish exceptionalism reproduces a

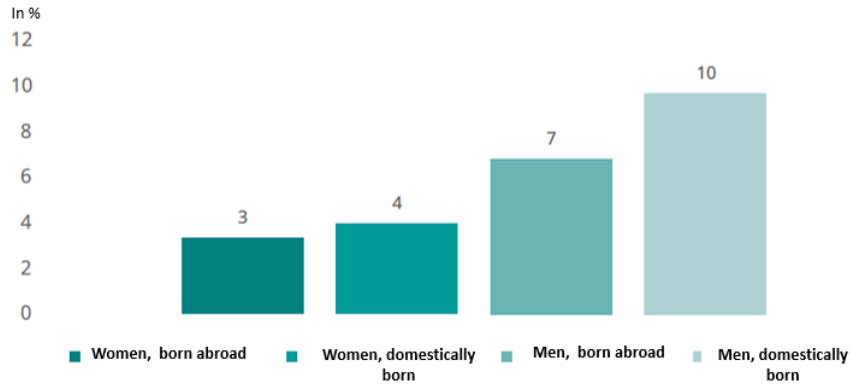
hierarchical order between a modern, highly developed “we” and a less developed Other, often stereotyping “the rest” as less equal and in need of help (Martinsson et al., 2016). Being Swedish is often today connected to being egalitarian and antiracist. Swedishness gives rise to feelings of belonging for some, such as individuals positioned and self-identified as white, modern, secular women, while others are excluded. Individuals that are Othered are often understood as “too religious, too black, too traditional or too exotic” (Alm et al., 2021, p. 4), giving rise of feelings of not belonging. Moreover, scholars have also pointed to the appropriation of gender equality by ethnonationalist and value conservative social movements and political parties that emphasizes Swedishness and gender equality as an important value in being Swedish and that identify immigration and the Muslim Other as a threat to this value (de los Reyes et al., 2014). Swedish gender equality policies have thus both had a positive impact on women’s lives and reproduced problematic norms on gender, sexuality, nation, and work (Giritli Nygren et al., 2018).

Women entrepreneurs in Sweden

According to the 2022 National Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, 9% of the adult population in Sweden is involved in early entrepreneurship, and that indicates a rise from 7.3% the previous year which is the highest rating for Sweden since the GEM survey started in 1999. This report also shows that 4.3% of the population are owners of businesses or established entrepreneurs which is 1.7% lower than the previous year. Regarding the percentage of entrepreneurship in Sweden, 6.0% of entrepreneurs are women and 11.8% are men. In addition, 82.6% of the population in Sweden believes that it is easy to start a business and that places Sweden in the top three globally (ibid.).

Figure 4.1 presents the percentage of women entrepreneurs born in Sweden and abroad and men entrepreneurs born in Sweden and abroad. Women born in Sweden run 4% of the businesses while 10 % of the businesses run by men in Sweden. Women born in Sweden run 3% of the business while 7 % of the businesses run by men born abroad. Women, both born in Sweden and abroad, are thus underrepresented as entrepreneurs compared to men born in Sweden and abroad.

Figure 4.1: Percentage of companies run by women and men (Tillväxtverket, 2019)

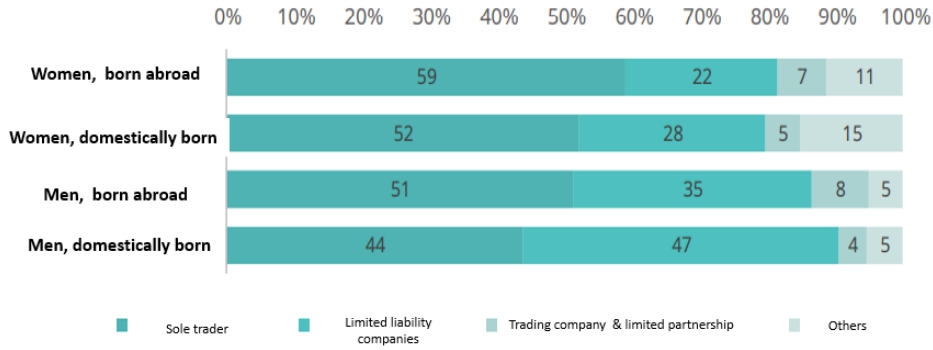


Turning to the number of newly started enterprises in Sweden, a report by the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis (2021) shows that there was a total of 78 690 enterprises in 2021 compared to 73 687 in 2020, an increase of 7%. This report also shows that the proportion of start-ups led by women was 33%, which is 1% higher compared to the previous year. In addition, the report shows that there was an increase of 7% in the number of new companies led by women in 2021, while the percentage of new companies led by men increased by 4%. Moreover, there was an increase of 7% in the number of new companies led by foreign-born people in Sweden, while the number of new companies led by Swedish-born people increased by 5% (Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis, 2021). Regarding the distribution of industry by origin, 66% of new companies led by foreign-born people were in restaurant operations and 69% in transport and storage, while 88% of new companies led by Swedish-born people were in forestry, agriculture, and fishing (Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis, 2021).

Regarding the legal form of the companies that operational entrepreneurs run, most of the companies run by women (especially women born abroad) are in the form of “physical persons”, such as sole proprietorships, while most of the companies run by men are in the form of “other limited companies”, as Figure 4.2 shows (Tillväxtverket, 2019). It is “other limited companies” that are the most rapidly growing form of companies and that are deemed important for

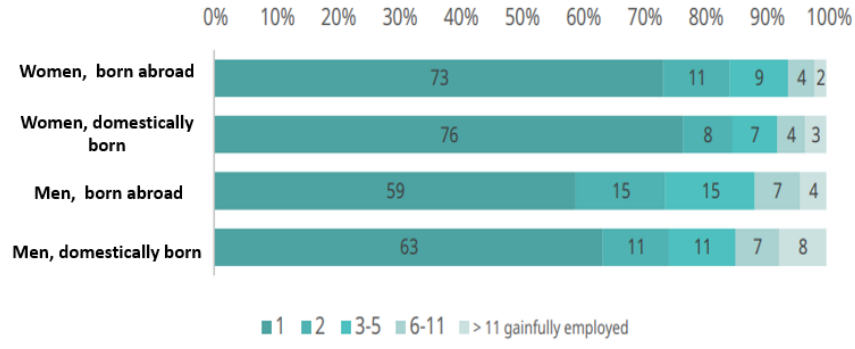
the economy as 10% of these companies generate 89% of the new jobs (Tillväxtverket, 2019).

Figure 4.2: Percentage of entrepreneurs running limited liability corporations in Sweden (Tillväxtverket, 2019)



In terms of company size, as Figure 4.3 shows, women run companies to a greater extent than men but with only one gainfully employed person. However, companies run by women born in Sweden employ more people than companies run by women born abroad and the same pattern can be seen between men born in Sweden and abroad.

Figure 4.3: Number of people employed in the ventures (Tillväxtverket, 2019)



Statistics show that immigrants have a propensity to engage in entrepreneurial activities. One explanation to this is that immigrants have access to less attractive job opportunities in the Swedish labor market than native Swedes, so becoming an entrepreneur is an alternative for immigrants (Tillväxtverket, 2013). This is labelled “necessity entrepreneurs” (Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis, 2021). Additionally, businesses run by immigrants in Sweden are mostly concentrated in industries such as hotels and restaurants, commercial and legal affairs, economics, or science and technology. Over half of the companies run by immigrants are in the hotel and restaurant sector (Tillväxtverket, 2012**;** Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis, 2021).

Government support for entrepreneurs

The organization of national policy for entrepreneurship (and innovation) in Sweden has a decentralized decision-making structure under which the government sets general goals for policy as well as a plan for distributing grants to the organizations that implement the policies (OECD, 2023). The main organization in Sweden providing direct support for entrepreneurship is ALMI (Almi Företagspartner AB), which works with 21 regional units across Sweden to provide access to venture capital, loans, and advisory services (OECD, 2023).

The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket) is another large organization delivering entrepreneurship support. This is an organization with the overarching goal of strengthening the competitiveness of Swedish entrepreneurs and SMEs (OECD, 2023). It promotes regional growth and entrepreneurship by strengthening networks and linkages with investors and by providing information on self-employment and business start-up through its website (OECD, 2023). There is also a small number of other organizations that are responsible for supporting specific groups of entrepreneurs; including the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) that supports the unemployed, and the Swedish innovation agency VINNOVA, that supports innovative companies (OECD, 2023).

Moreover, there are private-sector companies that help entrepreneurs to manage their information and regulatory obligations (OECD, 2023). There are also non-governmental organizations that have a role in the support system, including Nyföretagarcentrum, which provides advice and helps develop networks; IFS (Insamlingsstiftelsen IFS Rådgivningscentrum) that gives support to immigrant entrepreneurs; and Ungt Entreprenörskap, which works with entrepreneurial projects in schools; and the Ester Foundation, for example, provides training for unemployed immigrant women entrepreneurs in the early stages of their project (OECD, 2023).

In terms of policies targeting women entrepreneurs, recent policy developments in Sweden have adopted a mainstream approach (OECD, 2023). Since the 1990s until 2015, the Swedish government has offered tailored support to women entrepreneurs. In a study of how policies directed towards women's entrepreneurship have changed over time, Berglund et al. (2018) describe how initially women's entrepreneurship was seen as a way to redistribute power and achieve more gender equality, while during later years it is more focused on how women through entrepreneurship can contribute to economic growth. Women are portrayed as an unexploited, but still deficient, resource (Pettersson et al., 2017). Furthermore, in an analysis of how women entrepreneurs have been positioned in entrepreneurship policy in Sweden and the United States, Ahl and Nelson (2015) found that, despite Sweden's family-friendly welfare state, women entrepreneurs are still positioned as the Other within a discourse that subordinates women's entrepreneurship to other goals, such as economic growth. Ahl and Nelson argue that this has reinforced the perception of women as deficient, without considering the conditions that shape women's experience. In a later analysis of entrepreneurship policy in Sweden and the United Kingdom, Ahl and Marlow (2021) argue that the policy directives in both countries are characterized by postfeminism with their celebration of individual agency, empowerment, and choice drawing on the idea that "women can build their own bright future through new venture creation" (p. 61–62). This entails that entrepreneurship will not challenge existing gender inequalities but rather reproduce gender inequalities in new and different ways.

Summary

Sweden, along with other Nordic countries, is characterized by a “Nordic paradox”, which means that a relatively high level of gender equality coexists with persisting inequalities. Women’s labor force participation is almost as high as men’s, but the labor market remains highly segregated. Moreover, immigrant women in particular face challenges entering the labor market and have often been relegated to insecure, low-paid service jobs. Women also remain underrepresented in management roles compared to men. Furthermore, statistics show that foreign-born individuals and women start businesses at lower rates than men. Women tend to run smaller businesses concentrated in specific sectors such as hospitality. Government support for women entrepreneurs shifted from seeing entrepreneurship as a way to achieve gender equality to focusing on how women through entrepreneurship can contribute to economic growth. Since 2015, there are no targeted programs for women entrepreneurs in Sweden.

Chapter 5: Challenges of Being a Different Entrepreneur

This chapter will present the challenges of being a different entrepreneur experienced by the interviewed women entrepreneurs. The first section outlines the women's perceptions of entrepreneurship and their views of themselves as entrepreneurs. The second section reports on how the interviewed women describe the challenges they face as entrepreneurs and their reflections on these challenges. Their descriptions and reflections center around the various ways in which they experience being treated differently due to their gender and ethnicity. The aim of this chapter is to give the reader insight into the women's voices as they describe and reflect on the challenges they confront as entrepreneurs. The perceptions of entrepreneurship and challenges are presented thematically, staying close to the data, and using illustrative quotes. The final section provides a summary of the results presented in the chapter.

Perceptions of entrepreneurship

The women entrepreneurs who were interviewed were asked to describe themselves as entrepreneurs and whether they identify as such. Below are the main themes regarding how the women perceived entrepreneurship and saw themselves as entrepreneurs. A common theme was that an entrepreneur is a risk-taking, solution-oriented person. Some characterized entrepreneurship as a way of thinking, while others associated it with building large, successful companies. Whereas some fully embraced the entrepreneur identity, others did not, and some even described themselves as failed entrepreneurs. However, when the women discussed their own entrepreneurial endeavors, they related it to concepts of freedom, passion, and creativity.

A risk-taking and solution-oriented person

A common theme in the women's descriptions of an entrepreneur was that it was a person that does not avoid risk and uncertainty. For example, SW2 describes an entrepreneur as someone who is willing and even enjoys taking risks:

I think you have to love the risk of it, but it's not easy… but it's mostly positive, so you keep doing it… I think it's not as safe and you have to love not knowing what's going to happen there in the coming month… (SW2, Swedish white woman)

Another characteristic that was frequently mentioned was that an entrepreneur is oriented toward finding solutions. Being solution-oriented was often mentioned in relation to other skills, such as understanding the needs of others and having the confidence and bravery to think and act in novel ways. For example, SW1 connected entrepreneurship to being solution-oriented and good at listening:

I think that is the two words as being entrepreneur… solution oriented and to be good in listening… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

Similarly, IC2 related entrepreneurs to being brave and doing things differently in order to find new solutions:

Entrepreneur… someone who is quite crazy and not so scared… brave and does different things than others and finds her or his own way to finding a solution to create business ideas and is good both in create ideas and do lobbying for it and make sure that it will be business of that idea… entrepreneurs you create new ways to do [things] and they are very engaged in societies, want to change society… (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Related to the theme of entrepreneurs being solution-oriented is the idea of possessing a certain drive. For instance, SC4 described entrepreneurship as a way of thinking:

For me, entrepreneurship, it's more of a mindset rather than what I'm doing with my entrepreneurship, it's not about building businesses necessarily… a mindset that is solution focused and that is very hands on, that works with whatever I want to work with, more like the drive… I would define myself as

an entrepreneur more for how I think, how my mindset is, rather than what I do with my entrepreneurship… (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Identifying and not identifying as entrepreneurs

A few interviewees spoke of entrepreneurs as more specifically someone who is successful in building large businesses and accumulating wealth. For example, SC5 connected entrepreneurship to starting and developing large companies with many employees. She argued that compared to well-known entrepreneurs who have built large companies, she is not an entrepreneur:

Richard Branson is an entrepreneur, you and I not yet… An entrepreneur is a person that is setting things in motion, allocating people, supporting, appointing a CEO and moving on… that's an entrepreneur. You and I, we're not entrepreneurs, I am not an entrepreneur. I don't have a single employee… (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

In relation to the image of entrepreneurship being characterized by having a large business and being successful, a few white women spoke about themselves as unsuccessful and therefore not really an entrepreneur. SW3, for example, explained that she has never identified as a successful entrepreneur because she has always been struggling:

I have never seen myself as a good entrepreneur, always struggling, step by step because I don't have that with me, but I think it was also a big step for me when I started the company together with my two colleagues because then we kind of feel [it's a] bigger scene for us and it's grown. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

In a similar manner, IW3 argued that she does not really think she is an entrepreneur. She even defined herself as a failure because she is not earning much money:

But I can't really defend myself as an entrepreneur because I think you need to be earning a bit more money so like I want to do that but, at the moment, I don't really… and I'm, I don't think I'm really an entrepreneur, I tried to be

successful but I'm not really at the moment. So I define myself as a failure… but I've been that many years. (IW3, Immigrant white woman)

A theme that was particularly salient among the immigrant women of color was that they described themselves as successful entrepreneurs. They described how they had started building their businesses from nothing and now have large networks and many customers. Some also mentioned that their achievements have been publicly recognized. IC2, for example, described having received a lot of attention from media and won awards:

I have so many prizes for my entrepreneurship and my work, so I am famous… (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Relatedly, several immigrant women of color described themselves as brave and strong. For instance, IC5 explained how she was not afraid to take on the difficult challenge of starting her own business:

I'm just not afraid to say yes… even if I don't have the skills and the background… I'll say I don't know this right now, I'm gonna figure it out… I'm very open minded and brave and strong, yeah, and willing to take a whole lot of punishment because you're learning a new thing, [and] it might mean extra hours trying to figure this thing out, I'll be like because I'm just learning the thing and then once I know it I don't even spend extra hours anymore, so that's OK… (IC5, Immigrant woman of color)

Entrepreneurship as freedom, passion, and creativity

Entrepreneurship as a way to achieve freedom is a recurring theme when the interviewees speak about themselves as entrepreneurs. Most interviewees, irrespective of color or background, explained that it was their desire for freedom that had motivated them to start their own business. This could mean freedom to decide for oneself and to be in charge. IC3, for example, described how she enjoys the freedom of running her own business:

*I like what I'm doing. I like the freedom that I decide myself, everything, and not my boss, that's why I decided to have my own business… (*IC3, Immigrant woman of color)

In a similar way, SC5 emphasized the freedom of having her own business and being the decision-maker:

I'm very privileged and I'm free, nobody gets to tell me how to sit, how to walk, what to do, and I get to invent business, I get to have ideas … not having employees… no, I wanna be free. (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

Freedom could also be related to having the flexibility to decide where and when they work. SW1 also explained that having her own business, although it means working a lot, also allows her to take breaks to do other things:

Of course, being your own [boss], it also gives me some freedom but yes, I really try… to do a good job and then take breaks and do something else, to build the garden or something that just inspires me and then I can do a better job… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

Flexibility was also a topic that was discussed in relation to motherhood and work–life balance. Motherhood and work were mentioned as integral parts of the women's lives as entrepreneurs, as expressed, for example, by SC4:

My work is a part of my life, and my life is part of my work, so I think I try to get them aligned rather than have them separated… (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Several found that being an entrepreneur had enabled them to better reconcile work with their responsibilities as mothers. For example, SW3 explained that although her journey as an entrepreneur was difficult, it had also enabled her to strike a better balance between work and family:

A *long journey, lonely… but also very good like when my children were very small, it was such a good freedom… I had no fixed working hours, I could be more free, flexible, that meant a lot during that time…* (SW3, Swedish white woman)

Nevertheless, some women also said that it is not always easy to strike a happy balance between work and family despite being an entrepreneur, since it requires long hours, as IW3 explained, for example:

No, it's kind of like I work all the time and when I'm at home with [my] children… it started when they were so small, so I had to pick him up from daycare and later from school, so then you have, uh, actually, yeah, I mean there's no balance… (IW3, Immigrant white woman)

Being passionate about their professions and what they were doing, as well as being an entrepreneur, was another recurring theme in the interviews. A majority spoke about their professions as something they enjoyed and excelled in, mentioning that this passion had helped them when starting their businesses. They spoke about their professions with evident pride and confidence. For example, SW2, defined herself both as a photographer and an entrepreneur because she loves photography and business. She argued that, if she did not love the business side of entrepreneurship, she would not be able to work as a photographer:

It's been really good for me because… I love my work… I love the business aspect of it and I love photography of course, but if I didn't love the entrepreneurial side of it I don't think I would [have] lasted so long, you have to love the, yeah, the whole package… (SW2, Swedish white woman)

Another woman, SW1, explained her passion for interior design and entrepreneurship and said that she sees herself as both an interior designer and an entrepreneur:

Maybe I feel more like an interior designer in my heart but I couldn't be, I couldn't see myself in another company like an employee, so in that way I, always I can also see myself as an entrepreneur… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

Being an entrepreneur was linked to creativity in different ways. Many women emphasized both that they were creative and that being an entrepreneur

allowed them to be creative. For example, SW1 spoke about herself as creative and solution-oriented:

I should feel pressure if it was like that but now it's OK now, now, now the channel is OK so then I can just feel free to be creative with the company… I'm, um, oh it's difficult but I should say that I'm really creative and solution-oriented… I always want to find solutions and I think it's possible so that source is something that really encourages, you know, every day to find solutions for the customer to do the very best we can… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

Similarly, IW1 explained that she appreciates how entrepreneurship allows her to be creative and described herself as a creative entrepreneur in the following way:

It was a fun way to just be creative… it's just been kind of a natural thing for me… I'm more like a creative entrepreneur… I like the creative side… (IW1, Immigrant white woman)

A couple of interviewees specifically linked being creative to their profession as a designer or artist. For example, SW3 argued that, since she is a designer, being an entrepreneur gives her the opportunity be creative and express herself:

Yes, for being a designer, and having a space where I can express myself in patterns and colors… Yeah, to be a creative person. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

Challenges of being treated differently

The following section outlines the interviewed women's descriptions of the challenges they face as entrepreneurs. They described experiences such as lacking support, feeling belittled and excluded, having to work hard and be strong, and having to adapt. A shared aspect of these challenges is that they stem from experiences of differential treatment. The section also includes the women's reflections on inequalities in society, on their collaboration with other

women, efforts to promote change, and some of the advantages of being different.

Lack of support

All the interviewed women said that it had been difficult to start their business, that they had lacked a large network and knowledge, and that they had not received much support from the government. Most of their support came from family and friends, as SC4 explains in the following quote:

Yeah, that was especially something really grateful for support, like all of, I have grown up in there and the, like, a community or family space where it was always it was always empowered, it has always empowered us to go for our dreams and literally like you could be anything you wanted to… (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

However, the interviewees from ethnic minority backgrounds mentioned that, since they were immigrants, they had neither a network nor family in Sweden who could help them. They compared themselves to Swedish women entrepreneurs, who often started with their friends and family as customers, which had helped them to expand their networks:

Yes, everything was difficult because when you are alone… and when you don't know anybody and no one knows you, so the customers are not standing in line to give you a job. But when you have relatives here and family and friends, they can talk about you… (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Another example of not getting support that was mentioned in the interviews is the issue of funding. Several mention that they had experienced difficulties in securing funding. For example, IC4 at the time of the interview said she had very good opportunities of selling her products in a couple of countries but because she lacked funding to travel to different marketing events abroad, she was struggling to maintain and grow her business:

Now I have a very, very tough situation to try to survive every month, and to find finance, to be able to sell these products and to be able to develop that company… (IC4, Immigrant woman of color)

Although not all women had experienced challenges in relation to funding, several knew of other women entrepreneurs who had faced funding difficulties. This was the case of SW2 who had not encountered problems in securing funding when she started her business since she had previously worked for a bank, but she knew of others who had experienced problems, for instance, not being taken seriously and being belittled when applying for loans at the bank:

I know I have friends, other women entrepreneurs, that has, they hear this "lilla gumman" (little girl) you are little and you are not that… and if you're a man and you are coming into a bank, you get all the money and if you're a woman it's a lot more… it's hard. (SW2, Swedish white woman).

In addition, SC6 named the problem of women entrepreneurs getting much less funding than men who are entrepreneurs, referring to research into the gendered distribution of risk capital:

There was a report about a new 2021, apparently there was only 1% of capital that went to female founders… it's very clear that… it as a barrier, it's a challenge… (SC6, Swedish woman of color)

It is worth mentioning here that my observations indicated a slight difference in the way in which the women entrepreneurs spoke about lack of support. Women with longer experience and more mature businesses spoke less about financial problems. Instead, these women spoke about the need for government support in providing equal opportunities for both women and immigrants to gain access to knowledge, resources, and networking. They also described the lack of equal structures, or systems, where individuals are treated equally irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or color.

Being belittled

Many accounts of differential treatment involved situations where the interviewees felt belittled by men. Several descriptions concerned instances of not being listened to or being the object of condescending remarks. The women described experiencing having their voices go unheard and opinions unvalued,

but also how they were addressed in ways that made them feel uncomfortable. Some also mentioned believing that certain men had difficulties with assertive women and preferred listening to other men instead. For example, SW1 described feeling belittled by the way she is spoken to at meetings:

I have been to some kinds of meetings where I find myself a little bit smaller… where you could talk to me in a way that I feel like, hey, this is not right because I really felt like it's because I'm a woman… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

SC6 and SC7 described how they experienced that people did not pay any attention to what they said, but that when a man said similar things, he was listened to:

… barrier being almost like, I think it's sometimes you notice that some people don't take you as seriously as they would take a man, especially if you're talking about something that is emotional, people are like, oh, she's emotional like, oh, but if a man would have said it they would be like, oh, okay… (SC6 and SC7, Swedish women of color)

Similarly, SC5 said that she believes that many women share the experience of not getting any attention or being recognized when they contribute with ideas at meetings, while men may be celebrated if they present the same idea:

I think a lot of women have the same examples, like when talking, you get interrupted or you have to say an idea and nobody gives a… and then a man with the same idea, all of a sudden, he's a genius. (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

A few women mentioned that they had felt belittled, not only in relation to gender, but also ethnicity. For instance, SC4 described how Swedes have felt sorry for her because she is an immigrant, and have offered her support out of pity, which she found that demeaning:

I think there's a lot of situations where I've been treated like it's, like in Swedish we call it "synd om dig," like it's "poor little you" and they try to help

you more as a charity case rather than their they actually believe in you as a person… I think that is how people have treated me, they have treated me like poor little girl, or maybe the diversity card on a board or something like that. (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Yet another example of being treated differently in relation to gender and ethnicity, came from IC5 who said that Sweden is a particularly difficult place to work in because men tend to orient themselves towards each other and women must make an extra effort to be heard:

The hardest place to work in is Sweden. Men talk to each other, and they usually talk over women when you're in meetings, so you have to be pretty strong, raise a lot of voice and point and say "stop, now I'm talking!" (IC5, Immigrant woman of color)

Another aspect of feeling belittled related to how some women entrepreneurs reflected on the challenges of setting prices for their products and services. They felt there was an expectation that women should be cheaper, and this affected how they viewed themselves as well. Even when they thought a higher price was justified, they experienced lingering doubts about their entitlement to request that higher price. For instance, SW2, argued that it is a challenge to claim one's worth and that there seems to be a difference in what price levels are expected of women and men, and how women and men feel entitled to certain price levels:

I don't know if it's a woman thing but I think it's harder for us to raise prices … it's easy to look down on yourself… for a woman they maybe say "it is not worth that much," but if you're man and you say OK it costs 100,000, no problem, but if it is you a woman and you said it cost 100, that may be too much … (SW2, Swedish white woman)

Being excluded

The Swedish women of color and immigrant women of color spoke explicitly about being excluded. These descriptions are mainly about subtle signals in everyday situations that give rise to the feeling of being unwanted. For example, IC2 described how she often gets the feeling that she is not wanted

because she is perceived as being "too much," which she links to her being perceived as an immigrant:

People who don't like immigrants… why is she speaking all the time at this conference, why does she have so many ideas, shut up, so when you feel the gesture, but they don't say it aloud, but you feel it in something… several times… (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Nevertheless, as SC5 explained, it is not always clear to her on which grounds she has been treated differently:

Of course, I have been in situations where I have in every day, where I know either I'm being treated this way because I'm a woman or an immigrant or both, it's always one or the other… (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

Other interviewees mentioned that they had not experienced discrimination themselves but said that they know discrimination exists in Sweden. They provided examples from the labor market; for example, how people with foreign names do not get invited to interviews, or like IC3, referring to the existence of the anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats (SD):

I know that many people, they feel discriminated [against], but I never felt discriminated [against]. I have many Swedish friends and customers and they respect me a lot, so I do not feel [discriminated against] There is discrimination in Sweden, why there is the SD party for example. It means these things exist. (IC3, Immigrant woman of color)

A related topic that emerged in the interviews was jealousy as an underlying reason for discriminatory and racist behavior. IC2 used the term "Swedish jealousy" to describe how Swedes react negatively when someone, especially an immigrant, openly speaks about or flaunts having money. IC2 explained that, since a large portion of the taxes Swedes pay goes toward helping immigrants and refugees, Swedes who work hard and face high income taxes may feel jealous if they see immigrants spending money lavishly. She is therefore mindful about what jewelry and clothes she wears to avoid provoking such jealousy:

It is difficult for immigrants and some Swedes admit it and they say there is Swedish jealousy… Swedes are jealous even to Swedes. Because in Sweden as you pay so much taxes… if you work like a horse and work and work and most of your money goes to taxes and you see that your neighbor, or when you go out and you see immigrants standing eating pistachio nuts and they have so much fun, they get so angry… "this is my money, he doesn't work"… (IC2, Immigrant woman of color).

Also, IC3 explained that in Sweden, it is frowned upon to openly talk about money or show off wealth because inequalities are not accepted, and it will give rise to jealousy:

One should not talk about money. You can never ask a Swedish how much you have in pay. You can't, even if you ask, it's not good. You don't want to talk about money or pay. It's their culture, it's their upbringing. But for us it's okay if you own a lot and I own less. That means you're jealous of the one who has a lot, and I don't have much. (IC3, Immigrant woman of color)

A couple of Swedish women of color and immigrant women of color spoke explicitly about racism. Even though some women thought that racism was not expressed openly, or only under certain circumstances (e.g., under the influence of alcohol), others argued that it has now become acceptable to express racist opinions. For example, IC2 noted that there is a difference in what it is possible to say compared to a few years ago:

Of course, I felt discriminated [against], and now when look back I found so many things that I couldn't think about 10 years ago or five years ago, but now it is more acceptable to express yourself with your racist thoughts. (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Nevertheless, as SC5 explained, even though there is racism in Sweden, the situation is better for women in Sweden than in her country of origin:

I don't care about them [racists] because I get to live here, I get to be safe, my daughter gets to be safe. (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

However, not all the women claimed to have experienced racism. For example, IW1 reflected on the difference in conditions between herself, being white with a specific ethnic minority background, and other people of foreign background in Sweden. She has had positive experiences, while other people with ethnic minority backgrounds have experienced racism. She thinks that Swedes are more open-minded toward people with her ethnic background:

So, they're more open-minded to like [nationality] personality, a little bit more out there like, and that's like how we are. And I don't even know like I've had people say, Oh, you [nationality]! You guys think you know everything, but it's not even that. It's more just like… the way we speak, it's not like we're trying to be better than people. (IW1, White immigrant woman)

Having to work harder and be strong

Having to work harder than men to demonstrate their competence and get ahead in working life is another theme that emerged during the interviews. For example, IW2, who operates in an industry dominated by men, described having had to work hard to prove herself in relation to men:

As a woman, right from the start, you have to prove more… as a student, I had to prove that I ran as fast as everyone else, at that time in my promotion there were 300 students, 298 men, 2 women of which I was one… [I] knew all academic issues better than they, went through the education with the best grades in order to get respect. (IW2, Immigrant white woman)

Several interviewees of color and/or ethnic minority background described how, as women and belonging to an ethnic minority, they had to work much harder than native Swedes to get a job or to be successful. For example, SC6 and SC7 explained that it is more difficult for women in male-dominated contexts, in particular Muslim women:

But sadly, we live in a society where the male dominated like the business area is how to get into it as a female and especially if you're female or color and even more if you're a female or other that is visibly Muslim… (SC6 and SC7, Swedish woman of color)

However, SW3, who works in a women-dominated industry, argued that even in such contexts, men have advantages compared to women because they attract more attention due to being one of very few men. Moreover, SW3 believes that these men must be more motivated having to choose an industry that is not traditionally regarded as male:

I think it's… because there are so few in the [creative industry] field and they get more attention because they're more or special attention… I think maybe because they have a very strong motivation to be there as if not a typically male field so maybe the man actually chose to be in the [creative industry] field are very motivated. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

Many interviewees spoke about having learnt to be strong when facing differential treatment. IC5, for example, described having to be strong and assertive, emulating men's behavior, to make her voice heard and to gain respect in a business environment that is dominated by men, and where men will orient themselves towards each other. She finds that femininity can be interpreted as negative in a business environment, which results in men underestimating women's capabilities:

Men talk to each other, and they usually talk over women when you're in meetings, so you have to be pretty strong, raise a lot of voice and point and say, "stop, now I'm talking!" (IC5, Immigrant woman of color)

In a similar vein, SW1 described that she has learnt to be strong and to not let unfair treatment affect how she perceives herself:

What I learned after that [is that] I should be strong… I think that I have learned to not to analyze too much… like not to analyze that I'm a woman, and he's a man… and just think that we're equal and that's a mindset that I have after this experience that I have had… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

Also, IW2 explains that the adversary conditions that women face in society make women stronger:

Unfortunately, as long as men rule the world, it will be more difficult for us women. But that is not an "excuse" for crying and not trying anything when you have the opportunity to do so. I live in a free country, many don't have this chance, I can vote, dress the way I want, believe in whatever God I want, live with whoever I want… So yes, it's tougher for us, but then we become stronger, I think! (IW2, Immigrant white woman)

Having to adapt

Several of the immigrant women and Swedish women of color spoke in different ways about having to adapt to Swedish society. A couple of women described making efforts to integrate or be accepted in Swedish society by learning Swedish, and conforming to expectations, but said that they have yet to feel included. For example, IC2 said she focused very strongly on adapting when she first arrived in Sweden, but still does not feel accepted:

I know that Swedish [people] don't like that you come here, and you bring your brother, your sister, and your family, and I wanted to show them that I'm a perfect immigrant. (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

SC4 wished to see more inclusion in Swedish society, but that right now there is more focus on having people adapt to a Swedish norm:

I don't recognize myself and I feel like they're not talking about inclusive, like an inclusive society, which I feel more that I want to be a part of. I don't want to be integrated or adopted as adapted into a society that means integration and… that we have to adjust ourselves to everything that this society has built, the norms and everything, and I don't think that's quite fair… there's got to be like a give and take relationship. (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Some women said that they had succeeded in integrating into Swedish society. IC3, for example, explained that it was very difficult to get into Swedish society when she arrived in Sweden as a child, but that she now also feels Swedish:

When we arrived in the 1980s, there were not many immigrants. There were guest workers from Turkey, Greece, Italy but it wasn't the same. They were guests and worked here, but in the '80s we were new. It was really hard to

get into society… I have both Swedish friends and friends from [country of origin]. I've lived here for so long; I feel both Swedish and [nationality]. (IC3, Immigrant woman of color)

A related topic was the issue of cultural identity. Many of the women of color and an ethnic minority background spoke about as both Swedish and immigrant, or as belonging to both Sweden and another country or culture. For example, IC2, an immigrant woman of color, referred to Sweden and her country of origin as her two home countries. She said that she used to strongly identify with Sweden but with age, she has also started to feel closer to her country of origin:

If you asked me 10 years ago, I would say that I became very Swedish. But now when I'm, older… I start to feel more for my native country, my native language, I mean when I am in [country of origin] they think I'm more Swedish and when I'm in Sweden, they think I'm an immigrant. (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

Another Swedish woman of color, SC6, said that she identifies as both Swedish and other nationality because, when she is in her country of origin, then she feels more Swedish than when she is in Sweden. She identifies herself as both Swedish and as being from her country of origin and she is not sure how to label herself:

When I am in [country of origin]… then I feel more Swedish than I feel in Sweden… but I don't know how or what to call it because I'm still Swedish and I'm still [nationality], but I don't know what to call it, it's like maybe that's a crisis, but we need to find a definition… (SC6, Swedish woman of color)

SC7, who also identifies with both Sweden and her country of origin, emphasized that she sees advantages in this dual belonging because it is easy for her to work with people from different backgrounds:

I remember when I was younger there was this song, Hannah Montana, I used to sing, "you've got the best of both worlds." I would say I've got the best of both worlds, Sweden and [country of origin]. I love the fact that I can take

the best parts of both cultures … (SC7, Swedish woman of color)

IC4 also commented that it is difficult for her to feel fully Swedish or to fully identify with her original nationality because she feels that she belongs to both countries. She explained that she associates being Swedish with the fact that her children and her close relatives live here in Sweden, and she does not have any close relatives left in her country of origin. Therefore, she explained that she belongs to the society in Sweden even though she still has her culture and language from her country of origin:

It is difficult to be… [nationality], difficult to be entirely Swedish. I feel like both of them… [nationality] and Swedish… I am thankful to Sweden to be here. I love Sweden. Actually, my children are here… I belong in this society, this country. I am still [nationality]. I have my culture, my language. Yeah, so, both of them… (IC4, Immigrant woman of color)

A few women also spoke about embracing their many different identities. One Swedish woman of color, SC5, refused to define herself at all because she said she identified with many identities, and what she identifies with depends on the context. Instead, she empathized that in every situation she tries to do her best:

I'm a woman, I'm a mom, I'm this, I'm that, I don't care, I'm a human, and I'm trying to do my best with whatever… sometimes I feel like an immigrant, sometimes I feel like a Swedish person, it's based on the context. (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

IC5 took another approach to embracing her different identities. Instead of speaking about herself as Swedish or another nationality, IC5 defined herself as international, arguing that because she never felt that she belonged to her country of origin and now she does not really care about what country she belongs to:

… would say that I saw myself differently, but I didn't feel that I was able to claim that because back in [country of origin] I never really felt [nationality].

I didn't really think of myself as, yeah, [nationality]… I'm more international. [that's how] I see myself now… (IC5, Immigrant woman of color)

Reflections on challenges

The following section outlines the interviewed women's reflections on the challenges they face as entrepreneurs. These reflections center around inequalities in society, their collaboration with other women, efforts to promote change, and some of the advantages of being different.

Inequalities in society

Many interviewees reflected on the issue of gender inequality in society. Some discussed how the world is run by men, making it difficult for women to advance and achieve success in their careers, or at work. For example, IC5 noted that men dominate in business, even though Sweden is regarded as an equal country:

I mean, even though they say that Sweden is such an equal country, I think there is a strong culture of men to run the business, they are the ones who run [it], so we are the ones who work… (IC5, Immigrant woman of color)

Similarly, SC4, expressed that it is a disadvantage to be a woman because being an entrepreneur is associated with being a man, entrepreneurship is the "*manliest,*" as she calls it. Therefore, she thinks that women are viewed as weak within the field of entrepreneurship:

… unfortunately it's a disadvantage because in entrepreneurship it's so much it's like the manliest man thing you can do basically and the whole industry is colored with that like being a man being a risk-taker, it's associated with being a guy and being a woman is associated with not taking risks, not betting, not working as hard as you should be, so you think automatically people see it as a weakness. (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

A couple of women explicitly referred to inequalities explicitly as a structural issue. For example, SW3 spoke about structures in society that give men a superior position in relation to women and that exclude and underestimate

women of all ages. According to Ka, women have to deal with the consequences of this every day:

It can be like that but also structure is like that, you are not there when they have their meeting… But I think with the young girls, I think it's the same, like with me, you have the same… problems and we have to kind of fight against it every day. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

Several of the women of color also spoke of structures in relation to ethnicity. SC4, for example, explained that societal structures make it more difficult for people with non-Swedish names to get a job, irrespective of their qualifications. She believes that it is the structures, rather than the individuals, that reproduce the inequalities. Moreover, she argues that the way in which issues have been handled have resulted in the concept of diversity now having negative connotations in Sweden:

I think the biggest challenge is more systematic… the problems that we're facing with racism or exclusion, it is in the system rather than people in person, the person maybe will be really nice and have no nothing against you, but the system is built in a way that is super biased and super, I would think, segregating, I would say segregating, rather than the persons themselves. (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Collaborating with women

Some interviewees touched upon the importance of collaborating with other women. A few of the interviewed women entrepreneurs had started their businesses with other women. For example, SW3, a Swedish white woman, described how she and her business partner had started out as freelancers and sharing workspace, and after much talking came up with the idea of starting a business together in order to become more independent:

… then we started to talk about whether maybe we should do something together and also, as a freelancer, very dependent on others, and other people's choices, and now we have this idea to start working together, producing our own things and having control over everything. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

In addition, SW3, found that working on her own was a struggle, but starting a company together with two colleagues was important because it gave her a sense of stability:

… it is also a big step for me when I started the company together with my two colleagues because then we kind of feel a bigger scene for us, and it's grown. (SW3, Swedish white woman)

Nevertheless, a recurring topic among the women of color was, nevertheless, the difficulties in their relations to white Swedish women. For example, IC2 recalled a project she was pursuing as an entrepreneur in which a white Swedish woman had told her that IC2 had only been selected because she was young and beautiful. IC2 had been offended by this as she understood it as meaning that the woman did not approve of her being on the team:

They don't want you there, they don't like you… so you get discriminated [against] from Swedish women mostly." IC2 (Immigrant woman of color)

SC7 also said she finds it difficult to collaborate with Swedish women and suggested that Swedish women have difficulties in working with someone whom they perceive as being very different:

Yeah, difficult to deal with honestly. I would say Swedish women… in a way I think because… they get triggered by the fact that you're a woman that isn't ethnically Swedish, and you somehow have the strength to be so different. (SC7, Swedish woman of color)

Furthermore, SC5 explained that there is competition between women, which is a result of the male dominance in business, meaning that there are only a few spots available for women:

The people who have always worked against me the hardest, the people [who] have been putting up obstacles and the people who have been excluding me have been white women… women have this idea that, around this table,

there's only one seat and now you're my competition. (SC5, Swedish woman of color)

Working for change

Advocating change is yet another strong theme that emerged in many of the interviews. The women spoke about themselves as change agents who wish to deal with the problem of exclusion and discrimination, or their own feeling of injustice. Some women stated that their mission is to make a positive change in society and the main driver for starting their business was to help society and make changes such as helping ethnic minority groups to start or grow their own businesses. For example, IW1, a white immigrant woman, said that she is very passionate about helping other entrepreneurs in building their businesses and that she would like to be a mentor to help other female entrepreneurs:

But I am very passionate about helping other entrepreneurs and creatives in building their businesses. So maybe at some point I would like to help mentor other female entrepreneurs. (IW1, Immigrant white woman)

Another example is SC4, a Swedish woman of color, who spoke about her work with inclusion in society and trying to solve societal problems. She finds it highly motivating to work with other entrepreneurs from underrepresented or under-served communities:

… a bigger way for us to work with inclusion in society …. we work with the entrepreneur… we can empower people no matter where they come from… to go for their dreams and try to solve the problems in society, and why we started, well, why we chose to work with underrepresented or under-served communities is because they're not as [well] represented as the rest of the people in Sweden… (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Although it is not part of her business, SC6 has also helped young people from underrepresented or under-served communities to complete their studies and fulfil their dreams by acting as a mentor for children in schools, and she has found that working for change, and seeing change happen, makes her feel strong:

We have to work with their mindsets, we have to talk about like their attitude towards studies… so we started talking to them and becoming mentors more than tutors, and we saw a huge difference, we saw that when we help them see themselves as good people, as smart, as efficient… help them prove that they can have big dreams. (SC6, Swedish woman of color)

Some women also spoke about the change that they contribute with just by their mere presence. SC7 explained that just by being openly Muslim, she challenges the majority culture:

… like, we're like, we're disturbing people and if this is what disturbs people, like, I don't know, hijab or religion or background, then that says how they are and how we are, like there's a big difference… (SC7, Swedish woman of color)

Relatedly, SC5 explained that sometimes merely being present in the room is a step in the right direction. In order not to be stereotyped as "the angry immigrant" and thereby be able to stay in the room, she does not always call people out on discriminatory behavior:

… or somebody treats you poorly and you raise your voice, and you say "hey, you don't talk to me that way," and you're the angry immigrant. I don't know, I can give you a gazillion examples, but they're not important, it's not important because it's all about I'm in the room, and every time my physical appearance is in a room is when they lose so, I'm winning, and they are losing. (SC5, Swedish women of color)

Additionally, a few of the immigrant women and women of color spoke of themselves as role models. They said that either they had been identified as such by others, or they identified themselves as role models. For example, IC2 described how others around her identify her as a role model:

And sometimes I'm called a role model for other entrepreneurs, role model for women and role model for immigrants. (IC2, Immigrant woman of color)

SC4, on the other hand, explained that she wants to encourage both young women and young men to become entrepreneurs:

I think I'm a role model for a lot of young girls that want to… enter this field and I don't think only girls [but also] boys do that, want to try entrepreneurship, and that I hope I can show them how to be fearless and just go [for their] dreams. (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Difference as an advantage

Even though the interviewees shared many descriptions of the challenges they faced as women entrepreneurs that were related to them being different, they also described how they could see advantages in being different. Some thought that it was an advantage to be a woman because women have certain competencies such as empathy, handling emotions, and identifying other people's needs. For example, SW1 explained:

…something that maybe it's easy when you are a woman that you, I could sense the other person in the situation and yeah that's just… (SW1, Swedish white woman)

They argued that women can also see things from a different perspective, and that this is valuable because so much of business life is dominated by men. For example, SC6 and SC7 argued that businesswomen and leaders should value femininity and women's point of view, and not emulate men or display masculine behavior:

As a woman, you have the perspective of a woman… in the business world that's male-dominated, and [you] should do things the way a woman wants to do [them] and not try to imitate the way men do… because then they were losing the advantage of being human and being… female, so I definitely see it as an advantage… (SC6 and SC7, Swedish women of color)

Similarly, several interviewees spoke of their ethnic background as an advantage because it allowed them to see things from a different perspective which can also be good for business. For example, SC4 explained that her

background has given her the opportunity to look at the world through other eyes, which is enriching and something she has used to her advantage as an entrepreneur:

But I think there's two sides to this question… if we take it from how I view myself, and I see it as an empowering part of my journey because my background has given me the opportunity to look at the world with other eyes… I have a whole other perspective and I've tried to implement that in my startup… so I think for me it's always been an advantage, but I know that there have been situations where it has been used against me… (SC4, Swedish woman of color)

Summary

This chapter has outlined the challenges of being a different entrepreneur experienced by the interviewed women entrepreneurs. Some associated entrepreneurship with taking risks and successfully building large companies. However, not all women identified with this image. The women also challenged such norms by associating entrepreneurship with qualities such as being solution-oriented, having good listening skills, and a particular mindset rather than specific achievements. Several women also viewed motherhood as integral to their entrepreneurial ventures. These perspectives imbue entrepreneurship with a different connotation than risk-taking and success. Interestingly, immigrant women tended to describe themselves as successful entrepreneurs, while white women were more ambivalent about defining themselves as successful entrepreneurs, or even as entrepreneurs at all.

The interviews provided insight into both the challenges the women entrepreneurs faced, and how they actively worked to reshape perceptions of entrepreneurship. When describing the difficulties they encountered, the women explained how they experienced differential treatment compared to men. They described lacking support, feeling belittled and excluded. They also spoke about having to work hard and be strong in the face of these challenges. Immigrant women and women of color further discussed having to adapt to Swedish societal expectations and expressed ambivalence in relation to the issue of national identity. The women often linked these challenges to wider

inequalities related to both gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted the importance the women placed on collaborating with other women. However, some immigrant women of color also mentioned the difficulties of collaborating with white women. In response to inequalities, many women emphasized the value of serving as role models and engaging in efforts to drive change. They also discussed how being different could paradoxically provide advantages in some situations.

When the interviewed women described the challenges that they faced as women entrepreneurs, they described being treated differently from male entrepreneurs. They described lacking support, being belittled, and excluded. They also described how, in view of these challenges, they must work hard and be strong, and adapt. Immigrant women and women of color described having to adapt to expectations in Sweden. They also expressed ambivalence in relation to the issue of national identity. These challenges were often related to unequal conditions in society, in terms of both gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, the interviewed women spoke of the importance of collaborating with other women, although some of the women of color also mentioned difficulties in collaborating with white women. In view of these inequalities, many of the interviewed women spoke of being role models and engaging in work towards change. They also discussed how being different could be seen as an advantage.

Chapter 6: Conditions and Coping Strategies

The challenges described by the women entrepreneurs in chapter 5 consisted of experiences of lack of support, being belittled, and excluded, as well as having to work harder and be strong. In this chapter, to continue to answer the research question, I proceed to I discuss underlying conditions that shape the challenges described by the women entrepreneurs and what coping strategies they adopt.

The challenges can be understood as resulting from the unequal conditions that women as entrepreneurs face in a context in which men dominate in terms of numbers (more men are entrepreneurs than women) and where the entrepreneurial norm is perceived as male. Ethnicity and race also play a role in shaping these conditions. Due to these factors, the white women do not face the same conditions as the women of color or those with an immigrant background. These women share the experience of having to adapt to norms embedded in Swedish society that the white Swedish women do not have to navigate. In view of these conditions, and being aware of that these problems are structural, the women entrepreneurs expressed feelings of disappointment that also seemed to fuel their commitment to their entrepreneurial venture and working for change. In the final section, I outline four coping strategies used by the women entrepreneurs: a positive strategy, an assimilation strategy, an ambiguity strategy, and a change strategy.

Under different conditions

This section discusses the underlying conditions that have shaped the interviewed women entrepreneurs' perceptions of entrepreneurship and their experiences of being treated differently. The feelings of disappointment, sadness and anger expressed by the interviewed women are also be discussed.

Gendered perceptions of entrepreneurship

As presented in Chapter 2, scholars have discussed the male gendered entrepreneurship discourse (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Alsos et al., 2010; Ahl, 2006; Bruni et al., 2004a; Lewis, 2006). It has been shown that such a

discourse has consequences for the conditions that women entrepreneurs face and how they understand themselves as entrepreneurs. The gendered entrepreneurship discourse is also present in how the women entrepreneurs talk about entrepreneurship and themselves as entrepreneurs. All women entrepreneurs irrespective of their ethnic background and color used words such as risk taker and brave, which have a masculine connotation when describing the characteristics of an entrepreneur. Their descriptions of entrepreneurship mirror a traditional male norm in entrepreneurship that can be recognized from other analyzes of gendered entrepreneurship discourses in the media and academia both globally and in Sweden (Ahl, 2006; Bruni et al., 2004a; Lewis, 2006; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Owalla and Al Ghafri, 2020).

However, the interviewed women entrepreneurs also conveyed a different understanding of entrepreneurship by describing it as a mindset and focusing on listening and finding solutions. By using these words to describe the entrepreneurial character, they challenged the dominant perceptions of entrepreneurship that primarily focus on striving to accumulate wealth, achieve growth and building large companies. Moreover, the interviewees also related motherhood or womanhood to entrepreneurship when they spoke about themselves as entrepreneurs. By highlighting that they were mothers or insisting that they cared about their families and children they also convey a different understanding of entrepreneurship, one with more feminine connotations. The idea that women's entrepreneurship is different is thus produced by suggesting that women lead differently, prioritizing relationships with others (such as taking care of family and children) (cf. Lewis, 2013), often shaped in opposition to the typical characteristics of entrepreneurship (cf. Ahl, 2002). Indeed, there were even interviewed women who disassociated themselves from the typical characteristics of entrepreneurship and even defined themselves as unsuccessful if they were not pursuing growth or not making much profit.

Nevertheless, there is an ambivalence in how the women describe themselves as entrepreneurs. In some cases, these women were drawing on a feminine entrepreneurship discourse, while in other cases they described themselves using a male-gendered entrepreneurship discourse. This ambivalence emerges

out of the dissonance between constructions of femininity and the dominant male entrepreneurship discourse (Diaz García and Welter, 2013). This ambivalence can also be interpreted as meaning that women entrepreneurs face a challenge if they are linked to the male-gendered labeling of entrepreneurship. This means that women who are entrepreneurs are defined as the Other in relation to the male norm of entrepreneurs (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). Consequently, these women present themselves as entrepreneurs by in some cases associating themselves with womanhood and motherhood, while in others they associate themselves with the discourse of male entrepreneurship as the norm. Therefore, this ambivalence can be explained as an attempt to challenge the dissonance between the discourses of entrepreneurship and womanhood by including characteristics associated with women and traditional entrepreneurship.

The majority of women entrepreneurs in this study associated themselves with their profession and emphasized on their profession as an important part of their entrepreneurship journey and their identity. This can be interpreted as a way to appear legitimate (Lewis, 2013). By emphasizing in their professional identity, they seek to strengthen their position as women entrepreneurs in society because being an entrepreneur or a professional is admired by society. This is similar to the findings of previous research (Essers and Benschop, 2007). Linking their profession to being entrepreneurs, also gives them more power and emancipate them from their disadvantaged position within the male entrepreneurship discourse, as I interpret it and as previous research shows (Lewis, 2013).

The interviewed women entrepreneurs also linked entrepreneurship to freedom. Similar descriptions have also been found in previous studies on women entrepreneurs (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Berglund and Johansson, 2007; Marlow, 1997; Sundin and Holmquist, 1989). This suggests that these women are seeking autonomy and freedom through entrepreneurship, which in turn can be seen as a reaction to the inequalities they faced in their previous working life and in society in general (cf. Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018).

Othering processes

In their accounts, the women entrepreneurs shared experiences of lack of support, belittlement, exclusion, having to work harder and be strong and having to adapt. These experiences can be related to Othering, which is the dialectical processes by which the Norm and the Other, the powerful and the powerless, are identified and differentiated (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004).

Othering as belittlement

In terms of gender, the results show that women entrepreneurs experienced being belittled, such as not being listened to or taken seriously, or being targets of condescending remarks. There are also other descriptions in the interviews of more subtle gender discrimination, where women have, for example, felt that they were not being listened to or supported in specific situations where they were together with men. This can be related to the negative perceptions of women as discussed above, and as being a side effect of men's homosocial orientation towards one another, which results in women being ignored or invisibilized (cf. Holgersson 2013). Interestingly, the interviewed women related these Othering processes to structures in society, while for instance women entrepreneurs in Wales in the study by Jones and Clifton (2018) did not acknowledge that gender inequalities can explain their experience of being ignored by men. There are, of course, many interpretations to why women entrepreneurs acknowledge gender inequalities in one context and not in another. However, it may be so that the women who participated in my study chose to do so precisely because they were gender aware and wanted to share their experiences. Another possible interpretation could be that the relatively high level of gender awareness following many years of having gender equality being on the political agenda in Sweden may have made it possible to name gender inequalities.

The theme of having to work harder and be strong appeared when women entrepreneurs spoke about their experience of having to work harder than men in order to demonstrate their competence or prove themselves especially among those who work in an industry dominated by men. These experiences can be understood as resulting from what Kanter (1977) labelled performance pressures. Performance pressures arise because women are extra visible as tokens and therefore having to perform well to prove that they deserve their

position. Another type of performance pressure described by some of the ethnic minority women was more specifically related to Swedish culture. It appears that they are aware that being regarded as different in relation to the white Swedish male norm is a drawback. Several spoke about having to adapt to a Swedish norm and, as one woman said, trying to be the perfect immigrant who adapts and is successful. In fact, it was mainly the ethnic minority women who emphasized their success as entrepreneurs while it is only White women in my interviews spoke about themselves as not living up to the entrepreneurial norm of success. This emphasis on success can in fact be interpreted as a result of their token position, not only as a woman but as a woman of color and/or with an immigrant ethnic background.

Although not all the interviewed women were in a token position in their industry, they interacted with many male-dominated stakeholder groups (e.g., banks and government agencies) and among the overall group of entrepreneurs, they occupied a token position (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Goss et al., 2011; Lepeley, 2019; McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003). Previous research has shown, for example, that most funders are men and that this male dominance, and their gendered expectations results in greater challenges for women entrepreneurs than men entrepreneurs when seeking funding for their ventures (Balachandra et al., 2019; Geiger, 2020; Geiger and Oranburg, 2019; Kanze et al., 2018; Witteman et al., 2019).

Some interviewees who worked in women-dominated industries argued that, even in such contexts, men are advantaged over women because they attract more attention due to being among very few men and they are encouraged to be more successful. Indeed, it has been documented by studies of men in women dominated professions and workplaces that the experience and consequences of being in a token position is different for men. As Williams (2023) has shown, for example, there exists a “glass escalator” that privileges men in women dominated professions because men and the characteristics associated with masculinity are more highly valued. Men’s advancement is also a result of segregation processes in which they are channeled into tasks and positions associated with masculinity.

The theme of lack of support frequently recurred when the women entrepreneurs in this study spoke about the difficulties they had encountered when they started their own businesses. They related this lack of support to a lack of networking and a lack of knowledge about how to start a business but also to lack of support from the government. In contrast, the women spoke of their families and friends as sources of support, which can be recognized from other studies of women entrepreneurs (e.g., Essers et al., 2021).

Taken together, the Othering process of belittlement can be understood as a result of the token position of women entrepreneurs and the male norm in society and in entrepreneurship more specifically. These experiences of belittlement can be linked to the experiences of lack of support and performance pressures that women entrepreneurs describe.

Exclusion as Othering

The interviewed women of color, and those with ethnic minority background, described experiences of exclusion related to race and ethnicity. Similar experiences have been documented by previous research involving ethnic minority women entrepreneurs in different contexts (Carter et al., 2015; Pio, 2007). Being perceived as immigrants and not being acknowledged as Swedish is a recurring theme in the interviews. Some women with a minority ethnic background and of color said that they are seen as immigrants based on how they look or their accent, while others said that it is always emphasized that they are from somewhere else, not Sweden. Even when in situations that could at first be interpreted as positive, for example when receiving help, these are perceived as negative because it was done out of pity. These positive actions thus stem from benevolence and in relation to negative perceptions, which is reminiscent of how token women in Wahl's (1992) study describe their experience of "positive reactions in relation to negative expectations". Being seen as immigrants and not acknowledged as Swedes is problematic as previous studies such as Stead's (2017) show and can evoke the feeling of being excluded and marginalized. Stead's study shows that women entrepreneurs are being disadvantaged due to their lack of alignment with the gendered nature of entrepreneurship. This research adds to that lack of alignment with an ethnic identification of entrepreneurship because the dominant discourse of entrepreneurship is white and whiteness serves as a credential and is

considered a privilege within entrepreneurship discourse (Martinez Dy et al., 2018; Ray, 2019).

A specific form of exclusion was the experiences of jealousy that some women with immigrant background shared. This jealousy could be related to their minority position. Kanter (1977) argues that tokens are subjected to loyalty tests, by means of which they must demonstrate that they will not challenge hierarchy or culture within the group. Tokens can be accepted if they remain in a minority and conform to the culture of the dominant group. Jealousy can thus be seen as a negative reaction when people with an ethnic minority background display any kind of success that is perceived as challenging the ethnic majority's privileged position.

Women of color and women with an ethnic minority background also described experienced exclusion in relation to white Swedish women. Such experiences can be linked to the token position of women which puts them in competition to white Swedish women. According to Kanter (1977), the skewed numbers in a group force tokens to compete against each other. Moreover, Exclusion may also result from processes of ethnosociality (Holgersson et al., 2016; Knocke et al., 2003), in which white Swedish women orient themselves towards other white Swedish women, distancing themselves from women of color or with an ethnic minority background. Similar observations have been made among white and black women in management in the USA, and the uneasy relationship between these two groups of women has been related to the racial hierarchy in American society (Frankenberg, 1988; Smith and Nkomo, 2001, 2021). Thus, exclusion as Othering can be interpreted as a result of the token position of women entrepreneurs, especially of color and with an ethnic minority background, and the male gendered norm in society and entrepreneurship.

Awareness and disappointment

According to Kanter (1977), tokens will seldom acknowledge the existence of inequalities or that they are subject to discrimination out of loyalty to the dominant group and because they do not want to stand out as different. However, none of the interviewed women denied the existence of inequalities. They all connected the challenges they faced to structural inequalities in

society. While the Swedish white women mainly discussed inequalities related to gender, the Swedish women of color and the ethnic minority women, also spoke both about discrimination due to race, ethnicity and religion and even named racism explicitly. Being perceived as immigrants or "outsiders" made Swedish women of color and ethnic minority women feel excluded from Swedish society. In particular, the ethnic minority women stressed that they worked hard to adapt and integrate themselves into Swedish society; however, they faced rejection and exclusion. A strong sense of disappointment was conveyed in the interviews. I sensed the feeling that these women wanted to be included and to belong to Swedish society because they felt that they had a right to it, and they had worked very hard to get it but were not given that chance. This resulted in feelings of disappointment and anger, which they expressed either through a sarcastic smile or an expression of sadness on their faces.

In fact, most interviews contained a powerful narrative of facing unequal conditions and a sense of injustice. I was struck by the intense emotions conveyed - both through what the women shared and how they expressed it. When recalling experiences of differential treatment, many would laugh, sigh, or use irony, which I interpreted as ways to distance themselves from painful memories. Their facial expressions and gestures also seemed to emphasize how strongly they resented unequal treatment. I sensed that they wanted policymakers, especially the government, to hear their voices on issues of discrimination and the need for better support of women entrepreneurs, as equal conditions were clearly an important issue to them.

These experiences of injustice and disappointment seem, however, to have influenced these women's entrepreneurial ventures and fueled their commitment to change. Several women had created their businesses around the theme of inequality and discrimination and tried to promote change in society, for example, by helping other ethnic minority women to become successful entrepreneurs.

Coping strategies

The following sub-sections present the four different strategies that the interviewed women entrepreneurs used to cope with the challenges they faced: assimilation, positive, ambiguity and change. The concept of coping strategies used here draws on the literature on women's coping strategies as ways by which they reconcile multiple social identities with gendered, ethnicized and racialized norms of entrepreneurship, and thereby construct a positive identity (e.g., Chasserio et al., 2014; Dias García and Welter, 2013; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers et al., 2010; Lewis, 2013Stead, 2017; Ozasir Kacar, 2021). The strategies identified among the interviewed women are based on an awareness of different types of inequalities in society. All the women were aware of the unequal conditions between women and men in society so there is no real gender-neutral strategy (Wahl,1992) as the previous sections show.

Assimilation strategy

The assimilation strategy involves women entrepreneurs showing that they can adapt to the dominant masculine, white, Swedish, entrepreneurial norm. This is present, for example, when they describe themselves as strong and brave, characteristics that are generally associated with masculinity and entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Martinez Dy, 2020; Ogbor, 2000; Smith, 2010). Understanding themselves as entrepreneurs according to the dominant norm offers women the promise of legitimacy and acceptance in society and a sense of belonging (cf. Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Lewis, 2013). This can be linked to what Stead (2017) identifies as modeling the norm; that is when women replicate or reproduce dominant norms of entrepreneurship, which is interpreted as a way of performing belonging. An important note here is that this strategy does not necessarily mean denying the existence of gender inequality and other inequalities in society, as a more gender-neutral approach would imply. The assimilation strategy builds on an awareness of the power relations at play (cf. Stead 2017). Indeed, their entrepreneurship is often linked to the idea that entrepreneurship represents freedom and the source of empowerment that many women entrepreneurs have expressed, both in this study and in previous research (e.g., Berglund and Johansson, 2007; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Marlow, 1997).

Part of this strategy also includes emphasizing one's professional identity. Previous research has argued that professional identity can be of importance for how women entrepreneurs construct themselves as entrepreneurs (Lindgren, 2001; Kovalainen and Österberg-Högstedt 2013) because it enables them to appear competent, respectable, and legitimate. This also enables them to seek agency through the "norm identity" of being an entrepreneur and a professional (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Knight, 2016; Lewis, 2013). However, as Knight (2016) notes, this simultaneously has a disciplining effect because women then also have to adapt to a dominant entrepreneurial norm. This is adaptation or assimilation is indeed conditioned by the opportunity structures related to the institutional context, such as legislation and policies regarding entrepreneurship, gender equality and migration, and societal discourses around gender and ethnicity (Ozasir Kacar and Esser, 2019).

Assimilation was also achieved by distancing themselves from groups that are perceived as in some way different from the norm. For example, by emphasizing on being strong and successful entrepreneurs, ethnic minority women insisted on being capable and thus valuable to Swedish society, and simultaneously distanced themselves from the image of immigrant women as submissive and vulnerable. The assimilation strategy also surfaces when women entrepreneurs described themselves as being adaptive and making efforts to learn Swedish and adapt to Swedish society, which also differentiates them from perceptions of immigrants as not willing to integrate into society.

Thus, even though assimilating to the norm can to some extent can offer a form of limited legitimacy as an entrepreneur at an individual level, it contributes to the reproduction of dominant notions of entrepreneurship that exclude women and minorities, both symbolically and in terms of actual numbers.

Positive strategy

The positive strategy refers to when women entrepreneurs emphasize the positive aspects of being different (Wahl 1992). A similar strategy has been identified among women entrepreneurs with a migrant background (Azmat, 2013; Lewis, 2013), and among women in management (Wahl, 1992). The positive strategy comprises the practice of framing their difference as an advantage. Women entrepreneurs may, for example, describe how, because

they are women or because they have a different ethnic background, they have a different set of skills, competencies, or perspectives that are valuable. These differences are seen as enriching for them as individuals and as entrepreneurs. It is common, for example, to argue that having a different appearance or a different name, understanding another culture, and speaking another language can create new business opportunities and attract attention from stakeholders. As Stead (2017) notes, for example, many ethnic minority entrepreneurs use their different backgrounds as a competitive advantage by operating in so-called ethnic markets, providing products and services in ethnic niches. Pio and Essers (2014) argue that embracing such differences and thereby attempting to decenter Otherness and challenge stereotyped perceptions may provide women entrepreneurs with a certain room for maneuver, as well as a sense of belonging.

At many times during the interviews, the women demonstrate that they were aware that some of these apparent advantages are in fact based on disadvantages, such as their minority position or stereotyped perceptions, but they were trying to navigate these in order to use them to their own advantage. For example, some women argued that they were strong because they had to cope with challenges related to gender and/or ethnicity, or that they had become strong because of their efforts to overcome the challenges (cf. Essers and Tedmanson, 2014). In both cases, they projected an understanding of themselves as unique or exceptional. Ethnic minority women may also argue that due to their non-Swedish background, they are not held back by specific aspects of Swedishness such as the "law of Jante" or the wish to be "lagom" (moderate or just right) and therefore, in comparison to Swedish women, they perceived themselves as more capable, assertive, and unique. Since this strategy risks glossing over power differentials in society, and thereby reproducing stereotyped perceptions of gender, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship, the potential for change is related to these women's understanding of Otherness and Othering, and their ability to resist and evade being pigeon-holed in fixed categories (cf. Pio and Essers, 2014).

Ambiguity strategy

The ambiguity strategy involves women entrepreneurs switching between different identities or adopting a hybrid identity when describing themselves

as entrepreneurs or when, as a conscious strategy, they chose to ignore the problem of inequality. Women engage in identity-switching when they draw on different identities in different contexts (Stead, 2017; Essers et al., 2021). The theme of switching identities appears when women entrepreneurs, Swedish women of color, and ethnic minority women of color describe themselves using different identities such as being Swedish, immigrant, or both. Using different identities gives these women the freedom to choose what they want to be and to distance themselves from stigmatized categories, depending on the context. Women entrepreneurs will thus construct their identities depending on the context, in interaction with different groups.

As women try to transgress discursive boundaries through identity-switching to cope with Othering, making them "neither One nor the Other, but something else besides" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219 cited in Van Laer and Janssens, 2014, p. 193), it can also result in identity conflicts or as some of the interviewed women expressed it, "identity crises." This resembles the results of the study by Essers et al., (2021), which examined Muslim Moroccan female entrepreneurs navigating belonging. This study showed that Muslim Moroccan female entrepreneurs apply the tactic of identity switching to accomplish entrepreneurial belonging and to enable them to belong to various communities (such as simultaneously be an entrepreneur, of Moroccan descent, Muslim, and a woman).

Another way of handling these multiple identities is by identifying as international. By considering themselves to be international, the ethnic minority women entrepreneurs in this study were able to distance themselves from being immigrants in Sweden. Moreover, the label of international has a privileged, middle-class connotation which thus conveys an image of being exceptional. As Ozasir Kacar and Essers (2019) note in their analysis of Turkish (Muslim) women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, developing a transnational identity enables them to maintain their ethnic identity while at the same time being able to use their skills and networks to reinforce their middle-class status within Dutch society. A similar hybrid identity has been found in studies of ethnic minority women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands who identify as citizens of the world instead of identifying with one single

nationality (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Essers et al., 2010).

The ambiguity strategy also consists of the practice of consciously choosing to ignore the problem of inequality. Although the women entrepreneurs are aware of inequalities in society, they had decided that they would not pay any attention to them, hoping to instead be able to focus on developing their businesses instead. To some extent, choosing to ignore the problem of inequalities could be interpreted as a form of gender-neutral strategy that denies the impact of gender in the workplace and society which is common among women in management (Wahl, 1992). However, the interviewed women did not deny the impact of inequalities so this is a more conscious strategy that can, in certain contexts, will provide room for maneuver at an individual level, although the potential for promoting overall change is small. Similarly, acknowledging that inequalities exist but denying having been exposed to discrimination, could be interpreted as a defensive strategy (Wahl 1992). Just like ignoring the problem, it can offer some room for maneuver, and the possibility of belonging at an individual level without necessarily challenging any structures of inequality.

Concealment of otherness is yet another practice related to the ambiguity strategy. As Stead (2013) argues, by concealing their femininity and/or identity as entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs can make themselves less visibly different in various contexts. In order to fit in, and avoid being treated differently, ethnic minority women may, for example, conceal their ethnicity or religious background while in other contexts, they may conceal that they are entrepreneurs (cf. Essers and Benschop, 2007). Even white women in this study engage in concealing their identity of entrepreneurs by dissociating themselves from the dominant norm of entrepreneurship and claiming that they are failed, or not real ones. This is similar to what Bruni et al., (2004b) noted when women entrepreneurs avoided referring to themselves as entrepreneurs or saw themselves as entrepreneurs by default as opposed to entrepreneurs out of active choice.

Change strategy

The change strategy involves women entrepreneurs acknowledging the inequalities in society and seeing themselves as agents for change. This strategy involves engaging in different practices with the purpose of promoting social change. One such practice of the change strategy consists in disrupting homogeneous spaces through their mere presence. For instance, some women described how just being present in a room full of men was a way for them to claim their right to be there. By doing so, they would slowly disturb the homogeneous spaces and make room for change. In other words, women entrepreneurs are trying to promote change by being present. Another practice involves helping other women entrepreneurs through mentoring and collaborations. The results show that some women entrepreneurs encourage or help other women or other immigrants to become entrepreneurs. By doing so they are also disturbing the homogeneous group of white male entrepreneurs.

A third practice involves contributing to change initiatives targeting inequalities in society. The results show that some women entrepreneurs want to make a positive change in society by having the mission of their business to help ethnic minority groups to start or grow their businesses or solve the problems in society to motivate and help underrepresented or underserved communities. By doing so, they are empowering these group and disrupt the homogeneous dominant group.

These practices have different levels of change potential, however, and frequently take on the character of tempered disruption (Bruni et al., 2004b; Stead 2017), that is, practices in which women entrepreneurs disrupt the dominant gendered norms of entrepreneurship while simultaneously tempering this disruption. For example, being aware that their mere presence in white Swedish male-dominated contexts is perceived is disruptive, women entrepreneurs of color and with an ethnic minority background will abstain from speaking out in order to continue to be accepted in those contexts. Tempered disruption does not necessarily aim for change, although change may come out of such practices because its main goal is not change but belonging (Stead, 2017).

Summary

This chapter has discussed the underlying conditions that shape the interviewed women entrepreneurs' perceptions of entrepreneurship and their experiences of being treated differently due to their gender or ethnicity. This chapter has also discussed experiences of belittlement and exclusion as processes of Othering. As a result of these experiences, the interviewed women expressed feelings of disappointment, sadness, and anger.

Accordingly, the women entrepreneurs constructed their entrepreneurial identities in different ways in order to build a positive identity in relation to a gendered, racialized, and ethnicized entrepreneurial discourse. Four strategies to cope with the conditions they faced were identified: the assimilation strategy, the positive strategy, the ambiguity strategy, and the change strategy. These strategies are based on women's awareness of different types of inequality in society, such as the unequal conditions between women and men, and they are not gender-neutral strategies.

The assimilation strategy involves women entrepreneurs showing that they have adapted to the dominant masculine, white, Swedish, entrepreneurial norm describing themselves as strong and brave, and displaying characteristics that are mainly associated with masculinity and entrepreneurship. The positive strategy involves women entrepreneurs emphasizing the positive aspects of being different and discursively framing disadvantages as advantages. The ambiguity strategy involves women entrepreneurs switching between different identities or adopting a hybrid identity when describing themselves as entrepreneurs, or when, as a conscious strategy, they chose to ignore the problem of inequalities. The change strategy involves women entrepreneurs acknowledging the inequalities in society and seeing themselves as agents for change. This strategy involves engaging in different practices with the purpose of promoting social change.
These coping strategies thus enable women to construct a positive entrepreneurial identity for the individual woman entrepreneur but do not necessarily mean that these identities promote change. In the following chapter, the potential for empowerment and emancipation of these coping strategies will be discussed.

Chapter 7: Forms of Empowerment and Emancipation

In the previous chapter, the challenges described by the women entrepreneurs were related to gendered perceptions of entrepreneurship and Othering processes. The interviewed women related the challenges to societal structures and expressed disappointment over being treated differently despite making efforts to fit in. Four coping strategies were identified - assimilation, positive, ambiguity and change - through which the women entrepreneurs constructed a positive entrepreneurial identity in relation to the power structures they faced. Although these strategies are based on an awareness of societal inequalities and are not gender-neutral strategies (Wahl, 1992), and to some extent offer forms of bounded empowerment (Gill and Ganesh, 2007) by enabling them to act as entrepreneurs within existing power structures, it can be discussed to what extent these women engage in emancipation.

In this chapter, the coping strategies are discussed in light of scholarship contending that entrepreneurship can be understood as emancipatory (Calás et al., 2009) even in contexts such as Sweden that are not characterized by poverty and lack of gender equality (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). Drawing on the concepts of emancipatory entrepreneuring (Rindova et al., 2009) and forms of emancipation (Benali and Villesèche, 2023), three activities in the women entrepreneurs' accounts - navigating power relations, pursuing their passion, claiming their worth, and expressing desire for belonging – are discussed as potential forms of empowerment and emancipation.

Navigating power structures

As noted earlier, scholars have discussed the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship in women's lives (Calás et al., 2009; Rindova et al., 2009), in particular for women in contexts of poverty and patriarchal institutions. While scholars such as Jennings et al., (2016) have questioned the idea of entrepreneurship as a means of emancipation within a developed economy context, Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) argue that women in developed and developing contexts can engage in both empowerment and emancipation activities. Alkhaled and Berglund distinguish between empowerment as the

means for people to develop capacities through which they can act successfully within existing power structures and emancipation as the subversion of existing power structures.

When studying women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia and Sweden, Alkhaled and Berglund find that the Swedish women engaged in empowerment activities such as transitioning from employment to self-employment, being active in women entrepreneur networks, employing other women, entering male-dominated markets, and having ambitions to promote change. In terms of emancipatory activities, the Swedish women in Alkhaled and Berglund's study coupled their business ideas to emancipatory goals, engaged in supporting other women entrepreneurs, in particular feminist and minority entrepreneurs as a way to advance diversity, and collaborated with other organizations to promote inclusion and change. In many ways these activities resonate with how the women entrepreneurs I interviewed described their entrepreneurship. It can for instance be argued that they engage in empowerment activities when becoming entrepreneurs because they wanted to be in charge, to make their own decisions and have more freedom as well have more flexibility and work-life balance. These activities allow the interviewed women entrepreneurs to navigate power structures and strengthen their capacity to act within established structures and can thus be seen as empowering. Indeed, these women entrepreneurs have succeeded in establishing themselves as entrepreneurs and developing their business despite many challenges (cf. Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). They also engaged in emancipatory activities when they attempted to subvert power structures through their own business or by collaborating with other organizations to promote equality. Particularly the ethnic minority women and women of color spoke of their commitment to promoting equality in relation to gender and ethnicity. Several women also mentioned the importance of collaborating with other women, although here, the ethnic minority women were disappointed to discover that white women saw them as competitors rather than collaborators. Taken together, these activities by which women navigate and challenge power relations can be seen as forms of empowerment *and* emancipation (cf. Benali and Villesèche, 2023).

However, the women entrepreneurs also engage in more subtle forms of empowerment and emancipation. Drawing on Kandiyoti's (1988) argument that women's silence or adaptation to status quo in specific cultural and historical contexts can be understood as a veiled tactic, Benali and Villesèche (2023) argue that silence can be interpreted as a form of resistance where women opt for silence instead of overt confrontation in order not to jeopardize their position, particularly in very oppressive patriarchal societies. Silence is also a practice described in my interviews with the women entrepreneurs. For instance, E, an ethnic minority woman of color, applies a veiled tactic when she keeps quiet and listens in the male dominated room. She sees her presence in the room as a victory and to secure this victory, she stays silent. However, silence is only subversive and emancipatory if it over time enables women to acquire room for maneuver to be able to challenge power structures. As Goss et al., (2011) explain, women can avoid depleting the little emotional energy they have by being silent and passive and this can enable them to over time build agentic capacities. According to Goss et al., (2011), variations in levels of emotional energy can explain under what conditions emancipatory actions can arise and be maintained.

Pursuing their passion

Another form of emancipation consisted in the women entrepreneur pursuing their passion. Similar to the Tunisian women in the study of Benali and Villesèche (2023), passion appears to be a driving force for the women in my study. They spoke with emotion about their passion for entrepreneurship, for their business and their professions. Moreover, despite challenges, they persevere by working hard and staying strong to pursue their passion, achieve their professional aspirations, find solutions, and make space for their creativity. In fact, none of the women discussed economic survival or wealth creation in relation to their own entrepreneurship. By pursuing their passion and persevering despite challenges, the women entrepreneurs claim their right to do what they want. Indeed, they expressed strong desire for freedom and being able to make their own decisions. By doing so, these women try to "break free" from gendered or ethnic constraints (cf. Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). By trying to break free, women entrepreneurs can create space for themselves and gain legitimacy that can open doors for women entrepreneurs to have the

power to decide and influence or make changes in their field of work. That reflects the empowerment and emancipation that women entrepreneurs desire and wish for.

Claiming their worth

Furthermore, the women entrepreneurs claim their right to be valued by claiming their worth. As the study by Benali and Villesèche (2023) reveals that Tunisian women felt being estimated and face exploitation from ventures especially when they sense the buyers expecting them to sell their product very cheap or even give it for free. That is because the ventures or buyers expect these women to be grateful that they buy from them and get them out of poverty and other precarious conditions (ibid.). In many ways these examples from Benali and Villesèche study resonate with how the women entrepreneurs I interviewed described their challenges in relation to pricing. They explained that people around them thought they were too expensive even though other men in similar businesses were offering higher prices for similar products or services compared to women. However, the women entrepreneurs argued that they found their prices legitimate. The women defend their interests (Benali and Villesèche, 2023) and claim their worth by challenging their self-doubt and refusing to undervalue themselves. Thus, claiming their right to pursue their passion can be seen as attempts to "break free" from gendered constraints (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). By doing so women defend their interests (Benali and Villesèche, 2023) and claim their worth which can be interpreted as a form of empowerment and emancipation.

Desire for belonging

As noted earlier, strong emotions were expressed in the interviews. The women entrepreneurs expressed feelings of disappointment, anger, and/or sadness in relation to their accounts of being excluded, and not being accepted. Moreover, they all expressed an awareness of gender inequalities, and the Swedish and immigrant women of color expressed awareness of racial and ethnic inequalities. All of that contributed to frustration, feeling of unfairness, exclusion and not belonging to the Norm. I interpret these strong feelings as a result of a desire for belonging. Belonging is a practice by which "we relate to,

assimilate, become accepted, recognized and included" (Stead, 2017, p. 64). Accordingly, a desire for belonging can be understood as a form of empowerment by which they increase their room for maneuver within existing structures. Women entrepreneurs' practice of belonging also means being engaged in entrepreneurial activities, having access to entrepreneurial networks and resources, well as gaining legitimacy and acceptance in the entrepreneurship discourse (Stead, 2017). They seek belonging by adopting coping strategies that do not overtly challenge the Norm such as the assimilation strategy or positive strategy. The coping strategies can be seen as different ways of achieving or striving for belonging which open doors for them to be valued, accepted, included, be respected as well as be legitimate within the entrepreneurship discourse.

Belonging is also a notion that refers to being "in relation to something outside the self", such as a place which can be social or geographical sense (Anthias, 2013, p. 7). Accordingly, the desire for inclusion in Swedish society and the entrepreneurship discourse is the response to the exclusion that women entrepreneurs with ethnic minority background felt. From the definition of belonging, we can see that women entrepreneurs are struggling to be part of or have legitimacy to have a right to be Swedish (to be part of Swedish society), to be entrepreneurs (to be part of the entrepreneurship discourse) in both metaphorical and physical terms as I interpret it (Eckersley and Vos, 2022). These women used different coping strategies including identity switching to accomplish entrepreneurial belonging and to belong to the Swedish society (cf. Essers et al., 2021).

Belongingness is an important feeling of being "at home" in places and spaces, and it helps people to develop self-esteem and confidence, to be able to self-actualize, and to be able to live creatively and maximize their potential (Bacon, 2019). However, belongingness is complex, therefore, women entrepreneurs show ambiguity in feeling belonging to the entrepreneurship discourse or in feeling belonging to Sweden and their country of origin or ethnic minority group in the case of women with ethnic minorities. It is therefore important to highlight the importance of inclusion and diversity at the societal level, business level, and the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as that helps to foster belonging as a vital ingredient in such environments (Bacon, 2019).

Accordingly, is not enough to be included, people must also feel that they belong (Bacon, 2019) and that is what the interviewed women entrepreneurs are claiming, both to be included and to feel they belong within the entrepreneurship discourse and the Swedish society in the case of women with ethnic minority background.

Summary

Drawing on literature arguing that entrepreneurship can be emancipatory, the chapter discusses how the women entrepreneurs' coping strategies can be understood as forms of empowerment and emancipation. While empowerment means developing capacities to act within existing structures, emancipation means subverting power structures. Four groups of activities are discussed as potential forms of empowerment and emancipation: navigating power relations, pursuing their passions, claiming their worth, and expressing a desire for belonging. The interviewed women entrepreneurs navigated power relations by becoming entrepreneurs which allowed them to be in charge, have more freedom and flexibility, as well as a better work-life balance. This is interpreted as a form of empowerment, while activities aimed at promoting equality such as focusing their business on issues of equality or collaborating with others in work for change, are more emancipatory. The women entrepreneurs also engage in more subtle activities of empowerment and emancipation such as silence. Pursuing their passions despite challenges, claiming their right to do what they want and expressing a strong desire for freedom was discussed as a form of empowerment and emancipation. Yet another form of empowerment and emancipation consisted in claiming their worth by challenging self-doubt and refusing to undervalue themselves. Expressing a desire for belonging and seeking belonging by adopting coping strategies that do not overtly challenge existing structures is interpreted as a form of empowerment. However, coping strategies that involve more work for change can be seen as emancipatory. In sum, the interviewed women engaged through their entrepreneuring in various forms of empowerment and emancipation.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Contributions

This chapter concludes the arguments in this thesis by answering the main research question, highlighting the main theoretical contributions, discussing some reflection on implications for practice, and drawing attention to limitations and future research.

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this thesis was to explore the conditions of women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds in Sweden. To achieve this purpose, the following research question was addressed: "what challenges do women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds perceive and what coping strategies do they employ to navigate these challenges?" Sweden provided an interesting context for the study of challenges and coping strategies of women entrepreneurs as it is characterized by the co-existence of high formal gender equality and a low percentage of women among entrepreneurs.

A qualitative study was carried out collecting data through semi-structured interviews with 21 women entrepreneurs with diverse backgrounds living in Stockholm. The data was analyzed from a social constructionist perspective, drawing on a theoretical framework based on research on women's entrepreneurship and gendered entrepreneurship, focusing on issues of identity work, coping strategies, Othering, belonging, empowerment, and emancipation, as well as research on women managers, in particular the topic of tokenism and coping strategies among women managers.

This thesis answered the research question regarding what challenges women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds perceived by identifying challenges related to lack of support, being belittled, being excluded, having to work harder and be strong, as well as having to adapt. These challenges result from gendered, ethnicized, and racialized perceptions of entrepreneurship, and processes of Othering. The women entrepreneurs related the challenges they faced to inequalities in society and expressed disappointment over having to face such challenges.

This thesis has also answered the research question regarding what coping strategies women entrepreneurs employ to navigate the challenges they face by identifying four coping strategies: an assimilation strategy, a positive strategy, an ambiguity strategy, and a change strategy. These coping strategies enable the women entrepreneurs to construct a positive entrepreneurial identity in relation to a gendered, ethnicized, and racialized entrepreneurship norm.

The assimilation strategy involves women entrepreneurs modelling the dominant entrepreneurship norm by, for example, describing themselves as strong and brave and emphasizing their professional identity. This strategy builds on awareness of power relations and does not necessarily deny gender and other inequalities in society. The assimilation strategy can provide limited belonging and legitimacy for women entrepreneurs, but also reproduces the dominant entrepreneurship norm.

The positive strategy for women entrepreneurs involves presenting their differences as advantages, highlighting their unique skills, competencies, and perspectives. This strategy provides women entrepreneurs with a sense of belonging and room for maneuver. However, it also strategy risks glossing over power differentials and reproducing stereotypes.

The ambiguity strategy involves women entrepreneurs switching between different identities or adopting a hybrid identity to address inequalities. This strategy allows women to distance themselves from stigmatized categories and construct their identities based on their context. This strategy can, however, lead to identity conflicts.

The change strategy involves acknowledging societal inequalities and acting as change agents by disrupting homogeneous spaces, mentoring other women entrepreneurs, and contributing to societal change initiatives. Women entrepreneurs will nevertheless balance these disruptions practicing so called tempered disruption.

The women entrepreneurs' coping strategies are interpreted as ways in which they strive for empowerment, that is developing capacities to act within existing power structures, and emancipation, that is subverting power structures and emancipation. By navigating power relations, pursuing their passion, claiming their worth and expressing a desire for belonging, it is argued that women entrepreneurs, through their entrepreneuring, engage in potential forms of empowerment and emancipation.

Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the literature on gender and entrepreneurship. One contribution consists of the description of challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds in Sweden. Studying a diverse group of women entrepreneurs with an intersectional gender perspective has provided a richer description of the conditions women entrepreneurs face in a context marked by a "women entrepreneurship paradox" (Alsos et al., 2010) and a culture of exceptionalism that maintains an egalitarian and antiracist self-image (Martinsson et al., 2016). This answers to calls of more studies that approach women entrepreneurs as a heterogeneous group (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Swail and Marlow, 2018; Villares-Varela and Essers, 2021). This study also contributes to the literature on ethnic minority women entrepreneurs in Sweden, a body of literature that is still limited (with notable exceptions such as Abbasian and Yazdanfar, 2013; Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012; Pettersson and Hedberg, 2013; Pio, 2010; Webster, 2016; Webster and Haandrikman, 2017; Yeröz, 2019).

By identifying challenges faced by women entrepreneurs with different backgrounds in a context characterized by the coexistence of relative high levels of gender equality and a male dominance among this study extends the literature on the challenges faced by ethnic minority women entrepreneurs (Azmat, 2013). The study also contributes to this literature by relating the identified challenges to the token position of women entrepreneurs both in terms of gender and ethnicity drawing on research on tokenism (Kanter, 1977; Watkins et al., 2019) and to processes of Othering (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004).

Furthermore, the study adds to the literature on how women entrepreneurs cope with challenges by making sense of themselves and legitimizing themselves in different contexts (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019) by identifying coping strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs in the context of a "women entrepreneurship paradox" (Alsos et al., 2010). This furthers our understanding of the various coping strategies women entrepreneurs use to perform belonging and disrupt gendered assumptions (Stead, 2017).

This study advances our understanding of different forms of empowerment and emancipation. Distinguishing between empowerment and emancipation Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) have enabled discussions regarding the potential for empowerment and emancipation in the women's entrepreneuring and their coping strategies. Building on the study by Benali and Villesèche (2023), this study adds to the discussion by identifying other forms of empowerment and emancipation. Moreover, by studying empowerment and emancipation in a context that is not characterized by poverty and lack of gender equality, this study represents an addition to the literature on emancipatory entrepreneuring (Calás et al., 2009; Rindova et al., 2009) that until now has mainly focused on poor women in developing countries (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018).

Implications for practice

I believe understanding the conditions and coping strategies of women entrepreneurs has important implications for practice, both at the level of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and at an individual level.

My findings show that the male dominated entrepreneurial discourse, although it is challenged and resisted, is still very much present in the context of the women entrepreneurs that I have interviewed. It is still embedded in the opportunity structures (Ozasir Kacar, 2021) that the women must negotiate. Moreover, the different treatment that the women entrepreneurs that I have interviewed describe also show that entrepreneurship processes are gendered.

Changing discourses and practices is not an easy task, however I take inspiration from Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan (2015) who argue that promoting gender equality in entrepreneurial ecosystems is only possible by recognizing the many ways in which gendered is embedded in all entrepreneurial processes and contexts. Drawing on feminist perspectives on entrepreneurship, Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan propose what they label "a gender integrated conceptualization of entrepreneurship". They suggest that we need to imagine new ways of designing entrepreneurial ecosystems that promote gender equality and entrepreneurial support irrespective of gender. This conceptualization requires us to highlight the role of support organizations in addressing gender equality.

This is very much in line with my ideas of change based on my analysis of the challenges that the women entrepreneurs I have interviewed face. Gender inequalities will continue to be reproduced as long as mainstream entrepreneurship research does not critique our understanding of entrepreneurship and gender. If not questioned, research will continue to legitimize existing gender norms in society and thereby also inequalities reproduced through, for example, entrepreneurial support systems or through everyday interactions with different stakeholders. As noted earlier, the token position of women entrepreneurs and women managers is problematic and to alter this, the number of women in decision making positions needs to increase. For example, with more women in public policy (e.g., politicians, officials, think tanks) and finance (e.g., banks, venture capital, angel investor networks, incubator and accelerator programs, entrepreneurial competition judges, advisors) (Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan, 2018). As long as (white) men dominate these gatekeeping activities, there will be room for homosocial (and ethnosocial) decisions to be made that will continue to favor other (white) men. However, addressing numbers will not be solution enough. If the individuals in these gatekeeping positions, irrespective of gender, are not aware of the gendered nature of the entrepreneurship discourse and the disadvantages that women face in the entrepreneurial process, their decisions may very well just contribute to status quo. By taking part of research informed by an intersectional gender perspective such as this study, individuals in the gatekeeping positions can make more informed analyses and thereby also take different decisions that may promote more gender equal outcomes.

In addition, based on the broader view of entrepreneurship conveyed by the women entrepreneurs I interviewed and their desire for belonging, I believe we need to revise our understanding of the motives behind entrepreneurship. The view of entrepreneurship expressed by the women in my study goes beyond profit-seeking. Echoing Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan (2015), I argue that we need a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurship that celebrates entrepreneurs that not only have profit-seeking aims, but also those who seek "social justice, value creation for diverse stakeholders, and/or well-being and happiness over profits" (p. 8). If this broader view of entrepreneurship becomes more established, many of the challenges in terms of funding, support and legitimacy will possibly be attenuated. Once again, this requires that actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem have knowledge and awareness.

Scholars have also discussed the need for policy changes to promote gender equality in entrepreneurship. However, in a case study of Norway, Alsos et al., (2010) argue that policy measures often fall short, even in a society that is marked by the so called "women entrepreneurship paradox". This paradox entails a low level of women entrepreneurs compared to men in a society that is perceived as well-advanced in terms of gender equality where a well-developed welfare state provides childcare and other social services enabling parents to combine work and family; where women are well-represented in politics and the topic of gender equality is high on the agenda. Alsos et al., show that policies and measures have been put in place to support women entrepreneurs and the idea of women entrepreneurs is today accepted, but the results in terms of numbers is still disappointing. Alsos et al., (2010) find that policies are designed on the assumption that the lack of women entrepreneurs is due to women's lack of resources. Since the lack of women entrepreneurs is a much more complex issue, policies need to target many different areas simultaneously. Alsos et al., (2010) suggest that family policies should further encourage men to take more responsibility in the family; education policies should encourage children to make less gender stereotype choices; and equality policies should to a greater extent target the business sector. In my view, designing and implementing such policies requires knowledge about gender and entrepreneurship based on an intersectional gender perspective.

On an individual level, considering my findings, increased awareness and knowledge about gender and how women, collectively and together with men, can promote change at various instances in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and in everyday entrepreneurial processes, is necessary. Once again, knowledge about gender and entrepreneurship that enables critical assessment of current understandings of entrepreneurship such as produced in this study is crucial. This kind of knowledge can be disseminated through different kinds of programs and networks for entrepreneurs. Instead of unwittingly reproducing entrepreneurial culture that is highly masculine and competitive and that upholds gender stereotype thinking and enables Othering processes, such contexts could contribute to questioning mainstream understandings of entrepreneurship and generating new ideals that build on values of solidarity, equality, and social justice.

In sum, it is my hope that by providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and coping strategies of women entrepreneurs in Sweden based on an intersectional gender perspective, I have contributed to knowledge necessary to promote gender equality in entrepreneurship and society.

Limitations and future research

This study also has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, interviews were conducted mostly with those who can speak Swedish and English, future studies may want to include other immigrant entrepreneurs who speak other languages in Sweden. By studying the challenges of women entrepreneurs in a Swedish context that neither speak Swedish or English may offer important insights into an even more hidden group of entrepreneurs that most probably face different challenges than the women interviewed in this study. Second, the data in this study was collected only from Sweden, future studies could consider data collected from other countries, to obtain deeper and more nuanced understanding of the challenges and coping strategies used by women entrepreneurs in different contexts, including different context that are marked by the “women entrepreneurship paradox”. Third, as this study did not explore differences in terms of migration background, future studies may benefit from focusing more specifically on first

and second-generation immigrants. Fourth, this study focused only on women, future studies may consider both men and women with different ethnic backgrounds. Fifth, this research used mainly semi-structured interviews to collect data which capture women entrepreneurs' narratives, future studies may consider using other methods such as shadowing or participant observations that can capture other aspects of challenges and coping strategies by studying processes and everyday practices. Sixth, the sample in this thesis centers on a qualitative study of women entrepreneurs of a certain socioeconomic status but did not focus on how their backgrounds might have influenced their coping strategies and that can be an area to explore for future research.

The fact that I am a researcher of color with a non-Western background could be considered both as a limitation and as a strength that will have influenced the results of the interviews with women of color and/or with an ethnic minority background. It is possible that because they felt that we share common features (being of color and from ethnic minorities), they may have felt comfortable about sharing their concerns and feelings about their conditions as women entrepreneurs of color and with an ethnic minority background, as well as sharing the challenges they face from both gendered and ethnic perspectives. It may also be the case that being of color and non-Western also influenced the interviews with the white Swedish women.

In addition, the women whom I interviewed for this study do not represent all women entrepreneurs in Sweden because women entrepreneurs are diverse, and each case is unique. However, the results of this research show that women entrepreneurs face similar challenges and experience similar conditions, even when they have diverse ethnic backgrounds or colors. They have a connection, which makes them more vocal about the challenges they face.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions
Before the interview begins, the researcher provides information about how the interview will be conducted and how the data will be handled. The researcher gives the interviewee the opportunity to read the information document and answers any questions. The researcher then asks for consent and the interviewee signs the consent form.
Background How old are you? Do you identify as a woman? Do you have a Swedish background (that is born in Sweden with a least one parent born in Sweden)? What is your living situation (partner/children)? What education do you have? What education do your parents have? Any work experience that can be relevant?
Business profile In what sector would you place your company? In what year did you start your company?
Motivation to start your company How come you start your own company? How did you get the idea? What was the motivation to start your company? What is your goal with your business?
Institutional factors (registering a company) Do you remember any barriers in starting or running your business now than then? How did you handle these barriers? Do you remember what was helpful when you started your business? What about the financing? How do you finance your business? Did you take any training courses before you started to get the skills you need for your business? Did you have a mentor when you started?

Did you take any courses provided by the government authorities or other organizations?
Family support (parents, siblings, partner, children) Did your family support you when you first started your business? In what way? Today, in what way does your family affect you as a business owner? What experience did you learn from your family that helped you in your business?
Work – life balance How do you balance work and other parts of your life?
Education and profession What about your education and profession? In what way has it affected your choice to establish your company? Do you identify yourself with your profession, e.g., as a lawyer, nurse, teacher, etc. or do you primarily identify yourself as an entrepreneur? Why?
Role model Do you have any role models in your life, from your family or outside the family, someone who inspired you to start your own business?
Relation to entrepreneurship How do you describe yourself in a few words? How would you present yourself in a professional setting? How do you identify yourself, as an entrepreneur or according to your profession? How do you describe yourself as an entrepreneur?
Gender challenges Being a woman, has it affected you in any way in your business? If so, in what way? In your view, are there any challenges being a woman and having your own company? How did you cope with challenges related to gender (being a woman) in your company? In your view, are there any advantages being a woman and having your own company?
Future plans and expectations

What about your future plans other than what you said so far? Do you feel pressure to be successful? Do you want to add anything? Information about how the interviewee will be able to take part of the results.

Appendix 2

Information om studien Att möta annorlunda villkor - en studie av kvinnor som är entreprenörer i Sverige

1. Bakgrund och mål

Entreprenörskap är ett begrepp som i en västerländsk kontext har många positiva konnotationer. Att startat och driva företag ses som en viktig motor i ett lands ekonomi och som ett sätt att främja jämställdhet och integrera marginaliserade grupper. Forskning pekar emellertid på att entreprenörskap präglas av en manlig norm och att detta leder till att kvinnor möter annorlunda villkor och utmaningar i sitt entreprenörskap.

Det saknas emellertid kunskap om hur kvinnor som inte överensstämmer med normen för entreprenörskap förhåller sig till detta annorlundaskap. Syftet med studien är därför att undersöka villkoren för, och förhållningssätt hos, kvinnor som är entreprenörer i en svensk kontext.

Studien bygger på intervjuer med kvinnor som är entreprenörer verksamma inom olika branscher i Sverige. Studien strävar efter att få en mångfald av beskrivningar av villkoren och därför intervjuas kvinnor med olika bakgrund vad gäller ålder, etnicitet, utbildning och yrke. Målet är att genom ökad kunskap om kvinnors villkor som entreprenörer också bidra till ökad jämställdhet bland entreprenörer.

2. Förfrågan om deltagande

Då du tillhör målgruppen för denna studie är dina erfarenheter värdefulla för vår forskning. Vi hoppas därför att du ser positivt på att delta i studien. Nedan kan du läsa mer om studien och i punkt 9 kan du ge ditt samtycke att delta i studien.

3. Tillvägagångssätt

Intervjuerna med kvinnor som är entreprenörer kommer genomföras under hösten 2022. En person kommer intervjuas åt gången i ca 1 timme.

Intervjuerna kommer att dokumenteras genom anteckningar och röstinspelningar. Intervjuerna kommer att transkriberas och avidentifieras.

4. Information om studiens resultat

Resultaten av studien kommer att publiceras i en doktorsavhandling som kommer vara tillgänglig för alla digitalt.

5. Fördelar och risker med att medverka

Om du tackar ja till att delta kommer det att innebära att du kommer att bli intervjuad om din verksamhet, de villkor och utmaningar du möter och hur du ser på dig själv som entreprenör. Genom att delta i denna studie kommer du få reflektera över de villkor som du möter som kvinna och entreprenör och bidra till kunskap som kan förändra villkoren och öka jämställdheten bland entreprenörer.

Detta kan emellertid också innebära att du utsätts för risken att uppleva emotionellt obehag när du delar med dig av dina erfarenheter. För att reducera risken för detta kommer du att påminnas om att du endast berättar om sådant du vill dela med dig av och att du närsomhelst kan avbryta ditt deltagande. Om du trots allt upplever obehag kommer du att erbjudas uppföljande samtal.

6. Hantering av data och sekretess

Om du väljer att delta i studien kommer vissa uppgifter om dig, såsom ålder, kön och etnicitet, att samlas in genom en intervju. Intervjun kommer att transkriberas och avidentifieras så att enskilda individer, grupper eller organisation inte kan identifieras vid resultatredovisning. Uppgifterna kommer kunna kopplas till dig via en kodnyckel. Dessa uppgifter räknas som personuppgifter enligt EU:s dataskyddsförordning 2016/679 (GDPR). Anledningen till att studien behöver behandla personuppgifter är att studien eftersträvar att ta del av en mångfald beskrivningar av villkor som kvinnor som är entreprenörer i Sverige möter. KTH är personuppgiftsansvarig för denna behandling. Den rättsliga grunden för personuppgiftsbehandlingen är att behandlingen är nödvändig för att utföra en uppgift av allmänt intresse, enligt EU:s dataskyddsförordning, artikel 6.1.

Uppgifterna kommer att behandlas så att inte obehöriga kan ta del av dem. Endast forskare som medverkar i eller granskar studien som kommer att ha tillgång till uppgifterna. Uppgifterna kommer att lagras via en säker molnlagringstjänst som tillhandahålls av KTH. All data kommer förstöras 10 år efter datainsamling.

Enligt EU:s dataskyddsförordning samt nationell kompletterande lagstiftning har du rätt att:

- återkalla ditt samtycke närsomhelst
- begära tillgång till dina personuppgifter
- få dina personuppgifter rättade
- få dina personuppgifter raderade
- få behandlingen av dina personuppgifter begränsad.

Om du vill åberopa någon av dessa rättigheter ska du ta kontakt med ansvarig forskare eller dataskyddsombudet vid KTH på dataskyddsombud@kth.se. Om du är missnöjd med hur dina personuppgifter behandlas har du rätt att klaga hos Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten. Information om detta finns på myndighetens webbplats (imy.se).

7. Frivillighet

Det är helt frivilligt att delta i studien. Du kan när som helst välja att inte vara med längre och du behöver inte säga varför. Att avbryta din deltagande för inte med sig några konskevenser för dig eller din verksamhet. Om du inte längre vill vara med ska du meddela detta till den som ansvarar för studien, se nedan.

8. Ansvariga och kontaktuppgifter

Studiens huvudman är Kungliga Tekniska högskolan (KTH) och den leds av docent Charlotte Holgersson lektor vid KTH, med mångårig erfarenhet av studier kring betydelser av kön i arbetslivet. Studien genomförs av Aziza Al Ghafri och utgör en del i hennes avhandling.

Huvudman:

Kungliga Tekniska högskolan
100 44 Stockholm

Ansvarig forskare:
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Kontaktperson:
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100 44 Stockholm
Tel.: XXX
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Projektet har genomgått etisk prövning hos Etikprövningsmyndigheten, dnr 2022-03481-01

9. Samtycke

Jag har läst och förstått den information om studien som anges i dokumentet ”Information om studien *Att möta annorlunda villkor - en studie av kvinnor som är entreprenörer i Sverige”*. Jag har fått möjlighet att ställa frågor och jag har fått dem besvarade. Jag får behålla den skriftliga informationen.

☐ Jag samtycker till att delta i studien som beskrivs i dokumentet ”Information om studien *Att möta annorlunda villkor - en studie av kvinnor som är entreprenörer i Sverige”*

☐ Jag samtycker till att mina personuppgifter behandlas på det sätt som beskrivs i dokumentet ”Information om studien *Att möta annorlunda villkor - en studie av kvinnor som är entreprenörer i Sverige”*

Plats och datum	Underskrift och namnförtydligande
……	……