EXAMINING THE FEMININE NATURE OF VENTURE CREATION (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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Principal topic

While Bird and Brush (2002) and Ahl (2004) assert that venture creation is not gender-neutral, there is little in the research literature about the influences of gender, or “the feminine voice” on enterprise development. Building upon Bem’s (1981) feminine/masculine nomenclature, a two-by-two grid of new venture organizations is presented. Continuums reflect feminine/masculine attributes and economic and social outcomes. Four typologies are defined: neo-classical, contemporary, social and feminist ventures.

Method

To reconstruct entrepreneurship within a feminine voice, the work then draws on 25 in-depth structured interviews with for-women, by-women business owners. Firms included goods producers, service providers and venture investors. Discourse analysis focused on opportunity recognition, leadership, organizational structure and lessons learned.

Results

In terms of opportunity recognition, respondents sought to:

- empower, inspire, support and utilize women’s talents (“help women step up to the plate and play a much, much bigger game”; “help women attain status economically”; “connect and inspire women”);
- respond to family need (“we needed clothing underneath her [hockey] equipment”);
- fulfill untapped markets (“30 and 40 percent of women in Canada are size 12 and up and yet 5 percent of the retail space addresses that market”; women in trades, DIY);
- build community (“women who have been successful but that have always been in the shadows of men decided we’re going to start our own company for us”);
- create work setting to suit personal and business needs;
- be in a geographic location (“I just fell in love, total love with the tundra and the people of the north, the Inuit people”);
- make money (“I was making a load-full of money”); and
- professionalize a service (“It would be an art form, it would be a profession”).

Organizational structure was variously described as virtual, flat, strategically aligned, collaborative, “collaborative individualism”, unstructured, and voluntary. Respondents described themselves across a continuum of absolutely feminist to post-structural feminist and absolutely non-feminist. Gender-related challenges included perceived lending inequities, power struggles, legitimacy, presumptions by other women; and being taken advantage of. A variety of gender-explicit strategies were related.

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