



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Encouraging Female
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Encouraging female entrepreneurship in Belgium

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1. Introduction

1.1. Policy context

In a federal state such as Belgium, a number of actors and federal or regional government levels are involved in promoting entrepreneurship. The federal level is mainly involved in setting the rules for accessing a profession, intellectual property, social security for the self-employed as well as economic support such as fiscal regulations but also trade missions abroad. The regions provide specific supporting schemes e.g., advice for the unemployed to set up their own business, financing tools, networking opportunities, an agency facilitating international trade, etc. Language communities also play a role, in particular because of their competences in education. In terms of actors, public agencies as well as private organisations such as chambers of commerce but also not for profit association provide various services to support entrepreneurs.

In Belgium, there is no policy coordination between the different governance levels and actors nor in entrepreneurship in general nor for the specific issue of female entrepreneurs making the picture of entrepreneurship support quite fragmented.

Policies in favour of (female) entrepreneurship can be divided in two strands:

- SME policies focusing on existing SMEs and developing instruments to promote and reinforce the viability of these companies, e.g., access to risk capital and international markets;
- Entrepreneurship policies, which involve creating an environment and a support system to encourage new entrepreneurs to set up their own business, launch it and ensure early growth. Besides providing support to unemployed people looking to set up their own business, these policies also encourage start-ups in R&D and innovative fields.

1.2. Data on female entrepreneurship

In Belgium, 82% of the female population are in paid employment, with 18% of them being licensed professionals (medical doctors, lawyers, architects...), employers, self-employed or assisting a self-employed/spouse. Self-employment represents 22% of the total active population. Women represent one third of the self-employed workers (in 2012, 653,000 men and 335,000 women).

Tableau 1: Categories of active women not engaged as employees according to status and region (2012)

	Brussels	Flanders	Wallonia
Self-employed	76%	65%	68%
Self-employed employers	16%	21%	19%
Assisting a self-employed person	8%	14%	13%

Working women not engaged as employees are mainly working on their own. A minority are also active in a business with their partner as assisting spouses. However, this minority is on the decrease.

In comparison men are more likely than women to be registered as employers and less as an assisting person: in Brussels, 27% of self-employed men are employers (for 16% women) and only 1% are assisting a self-employed person (8%).

A breakdown by sector of activities reveals important differences in female participation as self-employed: women are a majority (51%) in services, well represented (42%) as professionals but only 20% in agriculture and 14% in industry¹.

Women entrepreneurs in Belgium have a higher education level than men: 64% of women with higher education contra 53% of men, while more men 25% against 12% for women have a technical degree. However, a higher proportion of men have followed complementary education in management.²

The average woman entrepreneur is a full-time worker who works an average of 50 to 60 hours per week, a lot more than employees in the private sector.

A key aspect to be noted is that 7 out of 10 business creators were employees before becoming entrepreneurs. 77% of women entrepreneurs are first timers.³ In that respect, it should be stressed that 43% of the self-employed hold a mandate as an executive in a company and amongst them, 1 out of 5 is a woman. Whatever the business sector, men in executive positions are the majority, while female executives are best represented in the service sector. This shows an important link between the participation of women in the labour market, and in particular in higher executive positions, and a higher rate of women entrepreneurs. To counteract the low participation of women in executive positions, the Act of 28 July 2011 demands that boards of directors of state-owned and private companies quoted on the stock market should be composed of at least one-third of members of the opposite sex. As long as this quota is not fulfilled, a person belonging to the minority sex must be appointed to any vacant position and any appointment, which does not comply with this rule is void.⁴

¹ Statistics (2012) of the Social Security Office for Self-Employed Workers, available on <http://www.rsvz-inasti.fgov.be>, accessed on August 8, 2014.

² Cobbaut N., *L'entrepreneuriat féminin en Wallonie*, les cahiers de l'ASE n°4, 2010.

³ Impulse, *L'entrepreneuriat féminin en région de Bruxelles-Capitale*, 2014

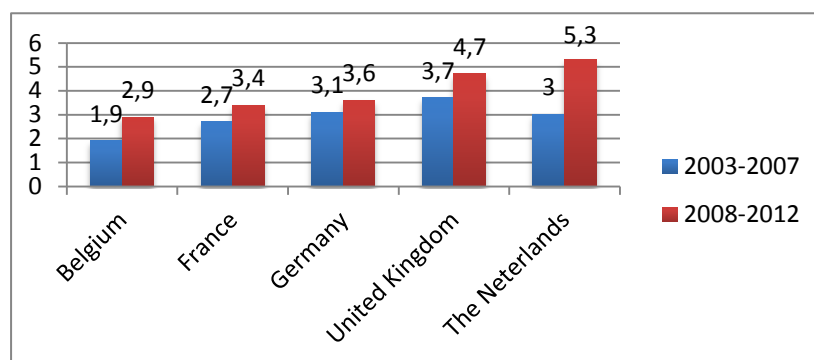
⁴ See on this topic Van Varenberg M, *Women in economic decision-making in Belgium*, comment paper, Norway 10-12 October 2012.

2. Policy debate

2.1. Entrepreneurship culture

An identified problem in Belgium, is the low rate of early state entrepreneurial activity as defined in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), which was around 5% in 2012 and is even lower for women.⁵

Graph 1 : Total female early stage Entrepreneurial activities in % – Average 2003-2007 and 2008-2012



According to the GEM, there is a low entrepreneurship culture in Belgium which is linked to the following factors⁶ :

- A high risk averse culture. In general, Belgians are cautious.
- Differences in social benefits for the employee and self-employed status are inhibiting new entrepreneurs, in particular in the context of unemployment policies.
- Unfavourable perception of entrepreneurship. According to the GEM survey, entrepreneurship education is lower than in other countries.
- Business executives enjoy less respect and a lower status in the media and public opinion than in neighbouring countries.
- Political dualities of parties that over-favour or over-discourage entrepreneurship has a negative effect on the general perception.

⁵ “The prevalence rate of individuals in the working age population who are actively involved in business startups, either in the phase in advance of the birth of the firm (nascent entrepreneurs), or the phase spanning 42 months after the birth of the firm (owner-managers of new firms)” in Bosma N., Crijns H., Holvoet T, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2012, report for Belgium and Flanders, 2013, p.22, available at <http://www.gemconsortium.org/teams/10/belgium>, accessed on August 12, 2014.

⁶ See *L'entreprenariat en Belgique: problèmes et défis*, Conseil Central de l'Economie, 2011, available at <http://www.ccecrb.fgov.be>, accessed on August 8, 2014 and Bosma & all, GEM report 2012 op.cit..

According to the GEM report on female entrepreneurship⁷, while there is no real gender gap in terms of willingness to become entrepreneurs (8% for female and 11% for male), women have different perceptions and attitudes than their male counterparts in terms of (GEM 2012):

- perceived opportunities: 29% women, 37% men (in the general population);
- perceived capabilities: 28% women, 46% men;
- fear of failure: 53% women, 33% men.

With regard to ambition, men and women (wishing to become self-employed) share the same objective to create their own jobs rather than growth objectives.

Women take a bit more time to start their business and make more use of supporting structures than men (56% for women and 47% for men). This support is judged very positively by those benefitting (96%). However, more and better information on available support has been highlighted as a need by both men and women.

2.2. Types of policies to promote female entrepreneurship

Policies specific to women entrepreneurship are conducted at the regional level.

In all regions a number of actions have been taken to support female entrepreneurship and raise the profile and the share of women owned businesses. The oldest network is the FCB-VVB or *Association des Femmes chefs d'entreprises* - Women company executives association that exists since 1949. More recently, a number of Networks have been initiated by private business support organisations through ESF funds (e.g. Diane in Wallonia and Markant in Flanders) and are still running. These networks organise social and business activities for their members (mentoring, business lunches, conferences...). They co-support visibility actions such as the "Trend Woman Award": once a year, a prize is attributed to a successful manager in collaboration with the economy magazine "Trends Tendances". The objective is to promote and give visibility to 'female role models' in different types of companies (three categories: entrepreneur, manager and start-up).

A number of interesting initiatives can be highlighted in the different regions. However, for the purpose of this paper only two very different and quite unique practices are presented.

2.2.1. A comprehensive approach to female entrepreneurship in the Brussels region

A study on the current situation of women entrepreneurs has been realised by the *Observatoire Bruxellois de l'emploi* (Employment Observatory for Brussels) and *Impulse*, the Brussels Agency for Entrepreneurship. The study presents statistics and indicators that can be used for monitoring progress as well as barriers and opportunities for supporting female entrepreneurship. A number of constraints are to a large extent similar for men and women, but the study underlines:

⁷ Allen E & all, 2007 *Report on women and entrepreneurship*, GEM.

- The fear of risk: while common to both men and women, in average, women are less present in professional education such as economy or finance so having less technical training related to entrepreneurship. Also 43% of men entrepreneurs like to take risks against 18% of women.
- Access to finance: women take up less loans for investment. They also have more difficulties to get bank credits, because they lack assets to which bankers give value, and/or because of some personal situations that are considered more precarious (single, divorced, having children...).
- Training: lack of specific training in relevant fields because of educational and vocational choices, and career experience (glass ceiling).
- Higher request for support and advice.
- Fear of administrative burden.

Contrary to what is generally thought, the study makes clear that men and women entrepreneurs do not see entrepreneurship as creating specific difficulties in terms of conciliating work and family life. This fear seems more linked to personal (or family) perceptions and stereotypes on the role of women in the family.⁸

The study presents possible actions to counteract identified barriers:

- Highlight role models to encourage women to have more confidence in their capabilities. Provide these models in a number of sectors and in various types of enterprises to avoid reinforcing the image of successful women being « exceptional » women.
- Networks broadly focused on entrepreneurship rather than on professional strategies.
- Stress that being an entrepreneur is not a barrier to family life but actually opens the possibility to reconcile work and family life.

On the basis of the study's results, the following actions were taken by the Brussels region:

- A web platform (<http://www.womeninbusiness.be>) for women entrepreneurs gathering all information on specific support structures, training and existing networks⁹;
- The platform is linked to Facebook and LinkedIn, organises events (such as a launching seminar), and works towards better connections between actors (such as co-events with existing networks);
- Women in business prize of 1,000 euro allocated to two dissertations on the subject of female entrepreneurship in Brussels (first year in 2015).

⁸ The absence of communication on the advantages of self-employment to work-life balance was also stressed in the GEM report 2012.

⁹ To access the platform, it is necessary to be member of one of the existing networks.

2.2.2. Affaires de femmes – Femmes d'affaires

The project “Business for women – business women” – AFFA – was started by *Crédal asbl* in 2006 and since 2012 *Crédal entreprendre*, which is a recognised structure supporting self employment (*structure d’accompagnement à l’autocréation d’emploi*) in Wallonia and Brussels (French-speaking Community).

Crédal entreprendre organises information sessions for all interested persons, men and women. For female entrepreneurs, AFFA proposes a specific quite intense and complete 3 months training and guidance programme. The objective is to verify with women participating if their project is viable before launching it. There are practical group workshops, some research work in the field as well as coaching for individual and in small groups. Women participating in the programme have an idea either at a very preliminary stage, or at an advanced stage but are not yet clear/decided on taking the jump. AFFA works specifically at that preliminary stage with women as their approach is based on the fact that when women decide to start their own business, there is a high probability that they will succeed. The crucial point is the decision stage and it is linked to gender issues, heavily linked to stereotypes about competences, roles and positions in society and the family.

This practice exists now for a number of years, is recognised by public authorities (e.g. Public Employment Service in Wallonia) and guide annually 70 to 90 women through the process of deciding (or not) to become entrepreneurs. What is quite unique is that this specific project led to the setting up of a new service within *Crédal*. The approach was to start with a specific project for women and it was eventually extended to both men and women. In general, it is the other way around: a general guidance programme launches a specific project for women. Here, it is AFFA who opened the route to a new guidance service “*Crédal entreprendre*” for any job seeker interested in creating her/his own business. While the majority of practice for female entrepreneurs try to counteract specific difficulties or obstacles faced by women, this programme lead to the creation of a general guidance programme.

3. Transferability issue

The UK practice is interesting in a number of aspects that should be considered in Belgium: involving the banking association in activities; appointing a women’s business champion, involving existing institutional structures to focus on female entrepreneurship and integrating with general economic and employment activities for women, to name the main ones.

The German practice is inspiring as it is targeting very precisely women in a specific professional activity and involves key business actors. In Belgium, an initiative has been launched in Wallonia, involving a diversity of key actors in the construction sector (trade-unions, the Building Confederation, actors involved in vocational training...) to attract more women in the building sector (<http://www.femmesdemetier.be>) as trainees, employees or future self-employed workers. Considering the low entrepreneurship culture in Belgium, the German practice offers a useful example to develop actions targeting future women entrepreneurs in the building sector and involving business structures that can support women to start a business.

Both practices presented raise the question of the need for specific services for women and the relation between specific and general services. This links with several issues:

- Female entrepreneurs are more educated than their male counterparts thus reflecting the situation in employment in general. However, during their career, female entrepreneurs face the same difficulties than female employees in taking up adult learning opportunities mainly because of time constraints. A specific request of women is to be offered remote (e-learning) training opportunities instead of more classical forms of training. Is there any activity of that type in the two practices presented?
- When designing services and support activities for female entrepreneurs, who are the beneficiaries? Are they the majority of female entrepreneurs or a limited number of successful women who can dedicate time to networking and social activities? It would be useful to categorise the beneficiaries of both (general and specific) types of support.
- The previous point leads to the issue of the definition of entrepreneurs. In Belgium, the main statistics available are related to the legal status of the self-employed, so any person creating her/his own job, from a medical doctor to a fake self-employed who actually works as an employee. Recently with the extension of the VAT obligation to all professional activities, tracing “entrepreneurs” in statistics has become even more difficult. What type of target groups are we talking about?
- Also when considering services available to all entrepreneurs, same point as above: who are the beneficiaries? Are they people taking risks, looking for growth...(concepts which are masculine in their formulation)? In Belgium, general support services currently target a certain type of entrepreneurs: entrepreneurs involved in innovative sectors or spin-offs or looking for growth (new market, access to risk capital). However, we see that the majority of entrepreneurs (or self-employed) are, in the first place, willing to develop their own employment. So in fact, general support structures are addressing the needs of a limited proportion of entrepreneurs, this being true for both men and women and even more for women (see statistics presented under point 1). Encouraging female entrepreneurship does not only mean providing support for women, but also demands influencing organisations offering support to all entrepreneurs to promote a less androcentric conception of entrepreneurship.

Specific tools or activities to boost female entrepreneurship should be visible in all activities supporting entrepreneurship. For example, *Impulse Brussels*, the Brussels agency for entrepreneurship is collaborating to the initiative “women in business”. However, on their own website, there is no link or reference to that initiative, leaving the issue of female entrepreneurs invisible in their own general activities. In the same way, existing female networks should be used to disseminate information, and not only on their specific activities, to reinforce the links between all supportive activities.