



Women's self-employment: An act of institutional (dis)integration? A multilevel, cross-country study



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate the extent to which gender equality disintegrates women's self-employment choice (compared to that for men) and whether this is contingent upon a country's development stage and industries. We rely on symbolic interactionism to argue that employment choices emerge from an interactive conversation between individual and social institutional processes. Using data from 61 countries, we find that overall gender equality is associated with the gender gap in men's and women's self-employment choices and that this association depends upon the country's development stage and industries. Contributions are made to women's entrepreneurship and institutional theory.

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1. Executive summary

Intuitively, a nation's gender equality policies, aimed at constructing and maintaining an environment that is both accommodating and supportive of women, are expected to have a positive impact on women's participation in self-employment (Bruton et al., 2010). Paradoxically, anecdotal evidence in women's entrepreneurship literature shows that in countries considering themselves highly egalitarian at an institutional level only women's employment is integrated, whereas women's self-employment seems to involve acts of institutional disintegration (Nielsen et al., 2010).

Seemingly, national-level institutions for gender equality unintentionally lead to lower participation in self-employment among women than among men. The gender equality policies in these countries focus solely on women's employment rights in the labour market, resulting in a preferential situation whereby women's employment options are favoured over their self-employment options. However, as this evidence is mainly anecdotal and originates primarily from the Nordic countries with distinctive welfare regimes and gender equality discourses, we set out to test this proposition beyond the context of the Nordic countries. We further investigate whether this disparity is contingent upon a country's development stage and industries.

We take an institutional reading of Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism to argue that women's employment choices emerge from an interactive conversation between individual and social institutional processes and that these choices unfold within larger institutional processes.

The core of symbolic interactionism is a theory of the self, which is constructed from constant, multifaceted, and closely interrelated conversations between the "I" and the "Me." The "I" signifies the creative destructive part of the individual, which

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provides the woman with the opportunity to raise her self-employment choice “... above the institutionalised individual” (Mead, 1934: 211), whereas the “Me” represents the external and socially directed part of the individual, which takes the social gendered institutional discourses of reality into consideration. We argue that self-employment is an act of disintegration in which individuals do not follow the “Me” and integrate their conduct accordingly to the institutional discourse, but in fact break with that discourse.

Based on observations that women might be more fettered by the “Me” compared to men, we argue that women are more likely socialised away from self-employment compared to men. Finally, we argue that the impact of national-level gender equality on women's self-employment choice compared to that of men is stronger in developed countries and male-oriented industries.

An extensive merged dataset is used covering 561,164 individuals across 61 countries to test our three hypotheses. We find that national-level gender equality negatively impacts women's self-employment choice compared to that of men, and that this negative impact is stronger in developing countries and male-oriented industries.

The contribution to the literature is threefold. First, in terms of the women's entrepreneurship literature, we expand the research object from an individualistic focus, searching for individual and socio-demographic factors that might influence women's self-employment towards accounting for interactive factors outside the individuals. Specifically, we followed Ahl's (2006) advice to set up comparative and contingent studies. Second, also following Ahl's (2006) advice we attempt to shift the epistemological position from an objectivist epistemology towards a constructionist epistemology by placing women and men within wider and multiple gendered institutional discourses, allowing both sexes to interpret and react differently thereto. This leads to the third contribution. We contribute to institutional theory's central ideas of embedded agency (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Institutional theory calls for further insight into the microfoundation of embedded agency (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). We advance previous discussions on embedded agency by introducing the interplay between the “I” and “Me” as a way in which to link the inner processes of individuals to the institutional context.

2. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to advance our understanding and provide statistical evidence of differences in men and women's self-employment choices using an institutional reading of Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934). We employ the institutional perspective to argue that women's employment choices emerge from continually interactive conversations between individual and social institutional processes. Specifically, we focus on institutional integrative and disintegrative forces that channel the choices and actions of individuals in different directions. With integration we refer to acts of incorporating an employment choice into the socially negotiated and commonly agreed-upon institutional discourses. On the other hand, institutional disintegration covers acts of employment choice that are in conflict with these discourses. We question whether, from an institutional perspective, the self-employment choice of women compared to that of men represents more an act of institutional disintegration.

Arising from the Symbolic Interactionist perspective is the idea that while men and women exercise individual autonomy in their employment choice, they are also influenced by the unique socially constructed institutional context to which they belong (Mead, 1934). Institutions affect whether or not self-employment is considered to be an appropriate choice and thus limit the individual's palette of employment choices. Tolbert et al. (2011) point out that literature on regional variance in entrepreneurship participation and on ethnic entrepreneurship, in particular, shows that the institutional context shapes entrepreneurial decision-making. The literature on women's employment has for some time focused on the importance of including the institutional level (Van der Lippe and Van Dijk, 2002), and women's entrepreneurship literature has increasingly moved away from an emphasis on individual socio-demographic factors towards a focus on the role of institutions (e.g. Jamali, 2009; Leung, 2011; Minniti and Naude, 2010; Welter and Smallbone, 2008). Nevertheless, the institutional literature in women's entrepreneurship is still sparse (Brush et al., 2009).

Conventional employment choice theory is grounded in individual rational choice models and thus in the idea of an individual decision maker who rationally estimates available employment options in order to maximise fulfilment of personal interests (Minniti and Lévesque, 2008). However, as noted by Pescosolido (1992), the rational model fails to capture the social and institutional forces influencing the employment decisions of individuals. Those forces empower what individuals will, can, and are legitimised to do, and they set consequences for individuals who do not follow the formal and informal guidelines of social and institutional life (Fine, 1993; Scott and Davis, 2007; Suddaby, 2010). The Symbolic Interactionist perspective emphasises that women's self-employment choice has to be investigated through a focus on micro/macro interactions, and thus individual rational choice models as well as strict deterministic institutional ideas are rejected.

Specifically, we are interested in how national-level gender equality (the macro-level) exercises influence in disintegrative ways on the self-employment decisions of women and men (the micro-level). Moreover, we are concerned with how these mechanisms are contingent upon countries' development stages and industries within countries. National-level gender equality covers institutionalised gender differences and disadvantages (gender gaps in economy, education, politics, and health) at a national level. These, according to Friedland and Alford (1991), are historically manifested in higher-order societal gender logics (which we refer to elsewhere as gender discourses). While these set the ground rules of the game, governing how women act towards employment decision-making, they are also constructed, reproduced and can be changed through social interaction. Gender discourses are open to interpretation and may well, therefore, result in the enactment of heterogeneous employment responses among women. By bringing national-level gender equality into our analysis of women's self-employment choice we provide the opportunity for a comprehensive investigation of different and perhaps even conflicting mechanisms at play in women's self-employment choice. As such, multi-level analysis is one of the strengths of the Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Chang, 2004).

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