**French women entrepreneurs: How do they perceive their work-life conciliation?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

## Sub-theme 34: Inequality, Institutions and Organizations

**Purpose –** The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of female entrepreneurs on their work-family conciliation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative study was undertaken during which life story and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 French women entrepreneurs.

**Findings –**We identify three categories of women and we highlight different aspects that seem to have a great importance for family-work conflict.

“Some common mental habits that inhibit creativity and innovation are ‘either-or’ thinking, security hunting, stereotyping, and probability thinking” (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 2004, p. 148).

According to several authors, the discourses and the language used to describe concepts of “entrepreneur” and “entrepreneurship” reflect their masculine roots (Bruni et al., 2004; Patterson et al., 2012) (e.g. strong-willed, energetic, active, visionary, daring, courageous, risk taking, driven and achievement orientated).

Despite years of progress and social justice, women remain discriminated against in the workplace. They are under-represented in senior management positions, still facing the glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1992), the glass cliff (Ryan & Haskal, 2007) and unequal salaries (Belliveau, 2012)

As far as entrepreneurship is concerned, empirical evidence suggests that women are less entrepreneurial than men (Georgellis and Wall, 2005; Kim, 2007, Orser et al., 2013). Not only the current proportion of female entrepreneurs is at a poor 30%, but women are still nowadays also less likely to set up companies than men in the same proportion (Bernard et al., 2013) - suggesting that the under-representation of female entrepreneurs is not due to the past or a higher rate of failure (Patterson et al, 2012). Complementary factors contribute to explain these differences (Allen et al., 2007, Patterson et al., 2012): stereotypes (entrepreneurship would be associated with male qualities), cognitive traits (risk taking, self-efficacy) and context (education, income, age, children or marital status). For example, being married increases woman entrepreneurship (as much as for men) while the impact of having children seems unclear. Women’s spouse support would play a more important role compared to men’s (Kirwood, 2009).

However, work-family conflict of women entrepreneurs still remains confused and needs further investigation by a qualitative approach (Bernard et al, 2013). In the present paper, 17 women entrepreneurs’ discourse is analyzed in order to answer to the following questions:

Do women entrepreneurs perceive a conflict between their family life and their working life? What are the factors that may explain this perception?

**Work-family-life conflict and balance**

Increasing attention has been paid to the issue of work-life conflict/work-life balance these last years. The family-work conflict notion is related to the idea that individuals have a limited amount of time and energy and that both private and professional spheres require a part which is not always well-defined (Segal, 1986).

Goode’s (1960) perspective argues that, due to limited personal resources, fulfilling one role depletes one’s time and energy, making it harder to fulfill another role. Whereas other researchers (Sieber,1974; Barnett and Hyde, 2001), emphasize that having multiple roles can confer benefits that more than compensate what they exact (enrichment). Individuals that are highly committed to their multiple roles actually create or find additional personal resources to meet their varying role responsibilities (Garey, 1999).

Work-family conflict consists of three components: (a) time conflicts, (b) role-produced strain, and (c) incompatible inrole behaviour patterns (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

This conflict is defined as the extent to which a person experiences incompatible pressure within the work domain and family domain as the extent to which a person experiences incompatible pressure within the family domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins & Duxubry, 1992).

Work-family balance refers to a 50/50 balance between work and family with respect to the amount of time, involvement, and satisfaction (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). Balance suggests that: (1) two elements are in equilibrium because they have the same weight; (2) one spends an equal amount of time on work and family roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003). One limitation of this approach is that not all individuals may desire a 50/50 balance between their work and family lives (Rapaport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). An individual can perfectly experience ‘work–family balance’, even though work ‘weighs more’ than family. That is why Poelmans and colleagues prefer to refer to ‘harmonising’ work, family, and personal life (Poelmans et al., 2008). Poelmans (2005a) argues that work–family conflict is an intermediate state in a continuous process of creating harmony between work, family and personal life, and that harmony may suggest a state of mutual compatibility, satisfaction, and wellbeing, even though a balance may still be lacking. This means that it is more interesting to analyze how people deal and cope with conflict and strive for harmony than in their temporary states of bliss or conflict. Poelmans (2005b) states that it is necessary to assess these states in function of people’s priorities, or what he refers to as ‘POP’ – Purpose, Objectives and Priorities.

Also, as it is the case with the concept of work-family conflict, the use of the term “family” is problematic. Some researchers prefer to use the term “personal life” so that the experiences of non-married and single individuals are considered (Burke, 2004). As well, this change in conceptualization allows other non-family activities, such as leisure time civic involvement and friendships, which are highly important to many individuals, to be taken into account.

**Female entrepreneurs and Work-Family Balance**

Research on work-family conflict is still in his infancy in entrepreneurship literature (Greene and al. 2003). Moreover, entrepreneurship is sometimes considered by women as a “problem” or as a “solution” to work-family conflict.

Knorr and al. (2011) found that work-family conflict is a “problem” for female entrepreneurs in Spain. Interviews of 20 men and 20 female entrepreneurs showed that women attribute more importance to housework after work that men do. Globally, only 21% of men consider that balancing work and life is a challenge, whereas more than 75% of women do. Similarly, a governmental report in France shows that 63% of women entrepreneurs (compared to 56% of men) confess that they feel exceeded by all they have to deal with (Bernard et al. 2013).

Kargwell (2012) tested in United Arab Emirates (UAE) the hypothesis that women entrepreneurs face a problem of family-work dilemma. The results did not support the hypothesis since 89% of the female respondents mentioned that their business did not have any negative repercussion on their family life. The author explains this result this way: “In general, because women are known as multi-tasked in many life aspects compared with their male counterparts, they succeed to strike the balance between the two commitments (i.e., family and business commitments)” (Kargwell 2012, p.128). Socio-cultural factors of UAE should certainly be considered, as equality between men and women on the workplace and in the family life is far from being exemplar. According to The World Academic Forum, UAE is listed 109th country on the Global Gender Gap Index 2013 (World Academic Forum 2013), whereas France is 45th. In UAE, a woman certainly does not expect her spouse to take any care of the house or the children, so when she creates a business, she already knows that she would have to manage alone (but with external help) both lives. As Woldie and Adersua state: “In many ways the ‘double burden’ (“Society exhorts women to be both producers and reproducers” stems from patriarchal traditions that are still followed in the majority of the world’s countries” (Woldie and Adersua 2004, p.80).

If entrepreneurship can result in work-family conflict for some women, it can also be a solution for others. Nel and al. (2011) have done case studies of Mumpreneurs in Australia (ranked 24th at the Global Gender Gap Index 2013). They show that the main motivation to create a business can precisely be to balance work and family. This phenomenon is called “Mumpreneurs”. In order to solve the conflict between work and life, women who are not satisfied with their previous job decide to create their own business (Cromie 1987; Boden 1999; Wellington 2006) because they consider that it is the only way for them to make a living and, in the same time, to take care of the children and the house (Fielden et al., 2003). Entrepreneurship offers indeed the flexibility that traditional workplace lacks.

In summary, this literature review reveals that work-family conflict (balance-harmony) still deserves exploration, moreover in entrepreneurship research. More precisely: Do French female entrepreneurs perceive work-family conflict (or harmony)? Are there differences among them? Which factors should be taken into account in order to better understand work-family conflict?

**Design/approach**

**Methodology**

According to Bernard et al. (2013), a qualitative research technique is needed in order to better understand work-life conflict since entrepreneurship can be either an obstacle or a solution to women’s life balance. Semi-structured interviews, partly based on life narratives, helped to emphasize how family and work interact within the businesswomen’s whole life course. A wide range of topics was covered: life narrative from their birth (parental education, education and career pathway…), reasons for becoming an entrepreneur, attitude about risk taking, objectives in a near future, behaviour about networking, helps and barriers encountered and work-family conflict. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and lasted between one hour and two hours and a half.

**Sample selection**

Female entrepreneurs were interviewed from two different regions of France (north east and south east), ranked 45th on the Global Gender Gap Index 2013. These two regions were selected because both have to face a high percentage of unemployment while most of the researches deal with more attractive regions (see for example Orhan and Scott, 2001). The north east used to be an attractive industrial area while the south east was mainly agricultural and has specialized in high education and research.

At present, the sample is composed by 17 women entrepreneurs. They were recruited at first from local female networks and then by a snowball sampling technique.

The sample is diversified in terms of age, degree and professional sector. On the other hand, all of them run a rather small business (between 0 and 30 employees) and have started from scratch their business themselves.

First each interview was summarized. The summaries help to give an overview of the different life pathways. The comparison of the 17 summaries led to the creation of categories of women entrepreneurs according to their work-family conflict perception.

**Case analysis results**

Three different categories were identified in relation to women’s perception of work-family conflict.

*Case 1: The absence of conflict:*

*pre-mumpreneurs (4 women out of 17)*

Pre-mumpreneurs are women who have just created their business a few years ago. They are in their 30s, live in couple or not, and are childless. They preferred to dedicate first to their business because they are aware that conciliation of motherhood at the same time as a business birth is not as easy a process. As A. states: *"I have spent quite a bit of time at the beginning and I'm satisfied to have done it, and now I know that I can have a baby".* They want to succeed in their family life hence they create a business that will be compatible with a fulfilling family life: a small business, with a weak investment and few employees. In this case, entrepreneurship is viewed as a way to reduce family-work conflict since it offers freedom in one’s schedule.

At present, they pay attention to their private live. Nevertheless, two of them admit their spouse already said they were working too much. They are attentive to their remarks because they know their spouse will help them keep their equilibrium.

*Mumpreneurs (4 out of 17)*

These women have chosen entrepreneurship as a way to conciliate private life and work and they have succeeded in living in harmony. They take time for their spouse and children (if any), for holidays and for their hobbies. As B. says: *"I was looking for a business that I could do by myself and that allow me to stop working whenever I want. If I want to close the door at 4 pm to go for a run on the beach, I just do it".* Their business is not a risky one: no employee, a weak investment. And they can afford not to earn a lot of money for they have properties thanks to their own previous work or their husband’s income. Two of them have lived in the past a stressing situation (an illness or a job they disliked) which helped them being even more aware of the need for conciliation. Moreover, their activity is a passion lived as a personal achievement.

*Case 2: The harmony is not an objective (4 out of 17)*

These women live more than ever for their work. Their independence is of great importance and they want to feel like they have succeeded. All have been divorced while they had young children. Two cases appear: either the father had the children custody (and they feel like it was the best option), or they had custody and then have outsourced childcare as much as possible. When money was lacking for outsourcing, a family-work conflict was encountered. For example, C., really feels compelled to take care of her children: *« you don’t have the choice, you have to be in front of the school at 5.30 pm. But once at home, I’m here but I’m not here »*: she sets up rules at home in order that kids do not bother her while she is working.

*Case 3: At the heart of a family-work conflict (5 out of 17)*

These women are in a key moment when they have to face at the same time their business growth and childcare. They live in a stable union for years. Their partners are present for child caring since they work less than women entrepreneurs do. Nevertheless women all complain about the family work they have to carry out once at home. Even if they get home at 8 pm, they still have to take care of children’s homework, cooking, etc. D. says: *« when the children were younger, they were even going with me at the toilets, they were always calling me while I was taking a shower … I felt like I was suffocating ».* They realize they would need time for themselves. Nevertheless they have a go-ahead and positive profile that helps them accept the situation.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Through these cases, different aspects appeared of great importance for family-work conflict.

First, **women’s life cycle** (and children’s age): the conflict is all the more important when women are in their 40’s with young children to care. Beforehand they better accept to work hard for a while, as long as they have time for themselves. Afterwards, they gradually learn to have hobbies and take advantage of their freedom.

This aspect may be true for many working women, particularly managers. However, in comparison, female entrepreneur have a freedom that can either reduce or increase the conflict. As a matter of fact, if some of them have learned to slow down (stop working in week-ends and evenings) and take vacation thanks to their entrepreneurs position, others feel like they never know how to stop while the business is always running and they are permanently connected.

Second, the **business life cycle** is also an important factor: women entrepreneurs work harder when the business is at its infancy and then during growth phases.

The conflict is greater in terms of time allocation and of stress when business life cycle and women’s life cycle enter a critical phase at the same time.

Third, **the spouse’s behaviour**, if any, is a major factor. The spouse can play a supporting role:

- in allocating time to child care and to housekeeping (or not);

- in bearing a stable money revenue (or not);

- in giving a moral support when women live stressing situations;

- in helping their spouses to be aware when they consume too much time working for their business and also in being understanding when much work is needed.

In this regard, the harmony is facilitated when the business is lived as a shared life and when each spouse gives a priority to the other’s career when it is needed. For example, some respondents said to have run the business after having followed their spouse in a new town, once their husband had finished studies and began to have a salary or once he had sold his own business.

And fourth **the reason for becoming an entrepreneur** (which is linked to the business size) can explain the family-work conflict since there is no conflict perception when women become entrepreneurs precisely in order to conciliate work and private life. There is no perception of conflict when the priority is work as long as they can afford to outsource childcare. Whereas the conflict is perceived when female entrepreneurs want to succeed at the same time in a growing business and in their private life.

Two remarks need further investigation.

First when women have created a business according to their own values and interests, they seem like they are their own person 24 hours a day. In doing so, they do not need as much time for themselves as they would do after suffering from a hostile working environment. In other words, even if they spend much time working, this time does not really invade their private life.

And second, do women really talk about a conflict between work and family or between work and leisure time? In this regard, housekeeping and homework are more perceived in the « work » sphere while a part of their work can be perceived as a leisure. Respondents who talked about family-work conflict expressed rather that they need time for themselves and for leisure. For example, playing tennis with children fall in the category leisure while homework does not, even if both activities are dedicated to children.

These results confirm first that as soon as women’s perceptions are heard, the concept of harmony (Poelman, 2005) between work and private life seems more relevant than conflict and balance. Second, “personal life” (Burke, 2004) is more suitable than “family”, except that we would add a rider that it is necessary to distinguish constraints from pleasure in both private and work lives. In this respect, further investigation is needed to better understand time female entrepreneurs devote to personal care (eating, sleeping…) in their potentially overloaded schedule.

Some scholars suggest that female managers, who cannot achieve their professional aspirations by hitting the glass ceiling, choose to leave the corporate world in order to create their own firms (Orhan & Scott, 2001). Leaving the corporate world doesn’t always prevent women from being affected by gender stereotypes and bias. Bosse & Taylor (2012) suggest “a potential Second Glass ceiling” faced by women entrepreneurs. Beyond the glass ceiling question, our results suggest that entrepreneurship may also contribute to reduce life-work conflict.

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