

# Women Entrepreneurs between Work and Family

## An Unbreakable Bond?

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### Abstract

One of the main characteristics of female entrepreneurial experiences, and one of the main difference between women entrepreneurs and their male colleagues, is the important role of family. Very often family relationships may act as a key factor in explaining why women decide to become entrepreneurs, in making their entrepreneurial experience possible and in determining their opportunities of success and development. From the early works concerning female entrepreneurship, the family issue has played a central role in analysis and research. Particularly in early research, attention was paid on the role family plays in pushing women towards entrepreneurship. Actually women entrepreneurship has often been interpreted as the result of push factors. It has been seen as a necessity, a duty or a constraint rather than as the result of women free choice or as an expression of women's personal aspirations and motivations. However it must be noted that family play a central role in women entrepreneurial experience not only as a source of source of constraints, obligations and duties. Indeed family may be involved in the experience of women entrepreneurs also as a source of resources and support. Family, especially birth family, may in fact give woman entrepreneur a very important help, very often essential with respect to her possibility to be in business. This happens when family provides important financial support (personal capital or guarantees which are essential in order to obtain bank credit). But family can also give a very important psychological support to a woman entrepreneur, especially when it encourages and/or shares woman choice to become an entrepreneur. Sometimes family also offers a decisive organizational support, especially when family members – mother, father, husband – help woman entrepreneur in managing household, in taking care of children, and sometimes even in managing business. With this premise, this work aims to describe different possible ways in which family – both the origin and the “new” family – can be involved in women entrepreneurial experiences. The analysis is accompanied by a presentation of some case studies, which were carried out by interviewing female entrepreneurs. The implications of these observations about the unbreakable bound existing between female entrepreneurs and their families are particularly highlighted. Under a methodological profile, the main conclusion of our analysis is that female entrepreneurial experiences – women's choice to become an entrepreneur and characteristics of their businesses – cannot be truly understood if attention is not paid also on family dimension. This latter aspect underlines a very profound difference between the entrepreneurial experiences of men and women, as it's very difficult to find similar situations when men entrepreneurs are analyzed. Under a sociological point of view, this analysis should help to better focus one of the key issue of women's life when they

try to balance family life with their work and their professional aspirations. This means that in order to support women entrepreneurship is essential to address this issue. Finally, it's important to know and understand the role of family in women entrepreneurial experiences in order to clearly interpret the reasons of women-owned businesses success or failure, as family ties will inevitably have an impact on their performances.

## **Introduction**

One of the main characteristics of the female entrepreneurial experiences and one of the main differences between women entrepreneurs and their male counterparts, is the role that the family plays. Very often family relationships are key factors in explaining why women decide to become entrepreneurs, how their entrepreneurial experiences are made possible and in understanding their opportunities of success and development.

From the early works written on female entrepreneurship, the family issue has played a central role in most analysis and research. In the earlier research attention was paid to the role that the family plays in pushing women towards entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurship has in fact often been interpreted as the result of push factors, as women's decisions to become entrepreneurs has been interpreted as a necessity, a duty or a restraint rather than as the result of women's free choices or as an expression of women's personal aspirations and motivations.

However, it must be noted that the family plays a central role in women entrepreneurial experiences and not only as a source of restraint, obligations and duties. Indeed, the family may be involved in the experiences of women entrepreneurs also as a source of resource and support. Family, especially the birth family, may in fact give women entrepreneurs a very important help, very often essential with respect to their possibility of being in business. This happens, for example, when the family provides important financial support (personal capital or guarantees which are essential in order to obtain bank credit). But the family can also give a very important psychological support to a woman entrepreneur, especially when it encourages and/or shares the woman's choice to become an entrepreneur. Sometimes family also offers a decisive organizational support, especially when some family members – mother, father or husband – help woman entrepreneurs in managing the household, in taking care of children, and sometimes even in managing the business.

With this premise, this work aims to describe different possible ways in which the family – both the birth and the marriage family – can be involved in female entrepreneurial experiences. For this reason a typology describing a variety of family profiles is presented in this paper. These profiles are outlined drawing both from interviews with a number of Italian women entrepreneurs, characterized by different familial conditions (married/unmarried, with/without children, and so on). Knowledge gained from these interviews has enabled us to identify the family profiles presented in the following pages. Their description is detailed with extracts from interviews with women entrepreneurs. These interviews are useful to better focus on the role of family in women entrepreneurial experiences. In fact, they allow us to “listen” to women's words and to better understand the role played by their family in supporting, encouraging, forcing or preventing and hindering their entrepreneurial experiences.

The paper is organized as follows. In the following section we present a literature review about the role of the family in women entrepreneurial experiences. In the second section the methodology used to collect data is described and the typology describing possible types of relationships between women's entrepreneurial experiences and their family is outlined. Family profiles are described in detail in the next section. Finally, the main

conclusions from the research are discussed and implications for future research are presented.

### **The role of the family in female entrepreneurial experiences. A review of the relative literature.**

In studies on entrepreneurship it is widely recognised that the birth family plays a central role in influencing career choices. There are different researches which confirm how people who come from a family involved in business follow the same path. This effect is even greater when the family firm is successful. (Shapiro, Sokol, 1982; Cooper, Dunkelberg, 1981; Hill, Welsh, 1986; Duchesneau, Gartner, 1990) due to the transfer of education, principles, values or behavior (Brockhaus, Horwitz, 1986; Scherer et al., 1990).

Another reason is linked to the transmission of information, knowledge and competencies which are within the family. The direct repetitive contact with people who work in the world of business favours the learning process which encourages and simplifies the entrepreneurial path (Krueger, 1993). From this point of view some research has shown how the family influence on career choices is conditioned by gender and occurs less in females. For women and, in particular daughters, the family effect on the career choice is often reduced or cancelled by other social and cultural conditions which induce them to prioritize other paths which are mainly the role of wives and mothers. (Matthews, Moser, 1996). In family business cases, for example, it is still very frequent to find that sons are preferred to run the family business (Dumas, 1992; Curimbaba, 2002; Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002; Vera, Dean, 2005; Haberman, Danes, 2007). The decision to not be involved in family business can be a voluntary choice made by daughters in only a few cases. Generally the daughters are obliged to give up the possibility of joining the family business because they are convinced that having children and other family commitments create an obstacle in the dedication required in running a family business (Cesaroni, Sentuti, 2012). In the circumstances of conditioning by the “birth family”, we can add the opposite influence of the “marriage family”, the husband and children. While the “birth family” can theoretically act as a stimulus towards entrepreneurship, these effects are less felt and often substituted by the effects that the marriage family has on them, which are mainly obstacles making a career more complex. This effect emerges clearly in the early studies on female entrepreneurship by Goffee and Scase (1985). The role of the family as a source of responsibility and constriction which conditions the way women-owned businesses are run is apparent most of all in the “domestic” category. They are women whose identity is centered on the role of wife and mother, creating duties and commitments which induce women to give a secondary importance to their career. The role of the family is clearly visible even in the “conventional” women category but to a lesser extent. Even having shown more commitment to their roles in business, working women maintain a strong attachment to the traditional gender role and they are not ready to sacrifice their family due to working commitments. The reason for this choice is often linked to the need to contribute to the family income rather than the desire to satisfy any personal ambition.

However, the family plays a central role in some profiles on business women outlined in the typology by Carter and Cannon (1988). This typology highlighted the modality of entering and remaining in the female business world. In particular the family role is important in the working experience of the “returners”, who returned to work after a maternity leave. For them business represents an opportunity to have an income and the possibility to conciliate work and family. The flexibility of entrepreneurship is an important factor for the “high achievers”, who are strongly orientated towards a career but who sometimes want to have a job which does not oblige them to penalize their family. The role played by the family

in the “traditionalists” category is totally different. These are women who come from families with their own businesses and whose career is the result of a work environment which was acquired within the four walls of home and shared with the rest of the family.

The typology proposed by Cromie e Hayes (1988) is also interested. They declare that an event as important as having children marks the difference between different women profiles. Such an event determines the nature of a woman’s objectives in her work and is a discrimination between those women, like the innovators, who do not have children and perceive their entrepreneurial experience as a means of self fulfillment and autonomy, and the other women entrepreneurs, like the dualists, who place the desire to balance work and family at the top of their priorities, precisely because they are mothers as well as business women. The returners, similar to those defined by Carter e Cannon, perceive their return to work as a way to regain their autonomy.

The central role played by the family in the female entrepreneurial world is also clearly evident from the studies which focalized on the motivations which push a women to become an entrepreneur (Scott, 1986; Moore, Buttner, 1997; Caputo, Dolinsky, 1998; Hughes, 2003).

This line of research highlighted the two main categories of these motivations:

- necessity-driven motives (push), that force women to become entrepreneurs. Starting a business is perceived as a necessity, as the only choice available because there is no opportunity of other work or because they have some family or personal restraints;
- opportunity-driven motives (pull) that attract women towards entrepreneurship. Starting a business is perceived as an opportunity, allowing a woman to achieve certain objectives and to satisfy her personal ambitions.

As some Italian authors affirm (Bruni et al., 2000, p. 159) “ the family constitutes the intervening variable between gender and entrepreneurship”, which is why in a woman’s experience, the dimensions between the family and work are always closely linked and sometimes it is very difficult to draw a line between the two areas of a woman’s life. (Caputo, Dolinsky, 1998; Donati. Prandini, 2009). This behaviour also influences the way in which women deal with managing their businesses. In line with the “integrated perspective”, proposed by Brush (1992), it is agreed upon that women entrepreneurs are able to integrate relationships involving family, community and business. Women don’t view their business as a separate unit in their life, but as an “*interconnected system of relationships*”. This means that when a woman becomes an entrepreneur, she doesn’t stop being a mother, a wife or a daughter. These roles will continue to deeply influence her entrepreneurial experience, where it is always possible to trace the involvement of her family which can sometimes facilitate her work but can also hinder it.

This is the deep-rooted difference between the entrepreneurial life of men and women. A man’s career and his success in the world of work are considered as fundamental elements in his personal identity, while for a woman these elements are still often conceived as being an option, as “something extra which she can integrate into, but never substitute the prevalent component of the female identity, or rather that which is linked to her role as a wife and mother.” (Abbatecola, 1999).

It is precisely for this reason that it is important to focus on the role of the family with regard to female entrepreneurship, with the aim of identifying and describing the plurality of the reality of the situation as affirmed by David (2006) “on the theme of female professional experiences, the family environment is often recurrent and is under different declinations”. The objective of this paper is therefore to analyse the role of the birth or marriage family in the professional experiences of women and to look into how the family intervenes and influences women’s choices in both positive and negative ways.

## Methodology.

In this paper we try to describe some family profiles, identifying the most common situations involving women entrepreneurs. The research question is to understand different types of family involvement in women's entrepreneurial experience. From a methodological point of view, we address the research question adopting a qualitative research approach based on case studies (Yin, 2009). Case studies are particularly suited to look at the meaning of the experiences of people, as it is a research strategy particularly suitable to examine in depth current events of real life. Data collection is based on direct interviews (McKenzie, 2007) with women entrepreneurs, through a semi-structured questionnaire (Qu&Dumay, 2011), guided by a checklist. The questionnaire has been tailored depending on the characteristics of the person interviewed. The interviewer's attention is focused on both verbal and non-verbal communication, trying to point out how much importance the family has had in the business. Ten firms were selected in Italy. These firms were selected because of their closeness to one of the authors which allowed local familiarity with the case, easier access to information and the ability to meet the entrepreneurs several times, resulting in a collaborative research approach with them.

In talking to these female entrepreneurs, we realized how much the family is a key element in their entrepreneurial experience, sometimes having a positive effect, but sometimes a negative one. These testimonies are useful to understand the role that family plays in their entrepreneurial experience and to identify the most critical issues associated with it.

The family profiles analyzed in the paper are briefly presented in Table 1.

### ***2.1. The family as a constriction***

The family constitutes a constriction as far as the female entrepreneurial experience is concerned. This is true in all situations in which the family intervenes and conditions the decision-making progress of a woman's future career, influencing her towards the choice of an entrepreneurship, even when this choice does not correspond with her true expectations, motivations and ambitions. Similarly the family can act as a restraint regarding decisions made by a woman who is already working in the world of business, conditioning the choices she makes regarding the management of her business.

An example of the first type is that of daughters from entrepreneurial families. This effect is, however, conditioned by gender. In the case of daughters in particular, the relationship with the family business is rather complex and ambiguous.

For Maddalena, who is a hotel owner, the family is a restriction because she is very young with different plans for her career. She has to follow her family business: "My family has been both a good and bad a restriction for me.....my profession was not my choice because I had to stand in for my mother who passed away. So therefore it certainly was not my choice and it was not my life plan ... *but "for now" I find myself in this situation. I say "for now" because I think that things change.*

*When my mother passed away I was studying Oriental Languages. I had gone home because my mother was ill but I planned to return. But instead, things changed. I'm not saying that I was obliged to make this choice but it wasn't my first choice and that is what happened."* (Maddalena)

For others, on the other hand, the family becomes a restriction because family commitments condition your career choice leading you to choose a job which makes the work/family situation easier. Maria Elisa, a restaurant owner, tells us:

*My Grandmother had fallen ill and so we decided to open a shop and I said “maybe we should open a shop so that we can manage to join family and work together” because we had to start thinking of our future.” (Maria Elisa)*

**Tab. 1 –A typology of family profiles**

<b>Family as a constriction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Daughters who feel forced to follow their family business as a sense of duty and respect for their parents, even if they have completely different professional aspirations;</li> <li>– Family commitments (children, husband, home) that 'force' women to downsize the business or to give up efforts in order to reduce time devoted to business and so better balance work and life.</li> <li>– Wives/mothers 'forced' to choose entrepreneurship because of its flexibility, in order to better balance work and family life or because they need to supplement the family income.</li> </ul>
<b>Family as a support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Psychological support: consensus on the entrepreneurial choice, encouragement and provision.</li> <li>– Financial support: financial contributions of family members to finance the start-up of the company or for its subsequent development also support in the collateral form to obtain funding under loan.</li> <li>– Organizational support: family collaborates in managing household, in childcare or in the management of the business.</li> </ul>
<b>The family as an opportunity</b>	Family business is seen as an opportunity not only from the income point of view, but also as a form of personal and professional self-realization.
<b>Family as generational continuity</b>	Female entrepreneurs who share their role with their children and are preparing their self to pass on their company.
<b>Family as a form of giving up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Unmarried entrepreneurs who have given up to have their own family because of work commitments and because of life-balance problems.</li> <li>– Women entrepreneurs who don't need the help of their birth family because they are very independent.</li> </ul>

Even young entrepreneurs who are not married and who do not have children can be conditioned in their business plans and sometimes have to adapt due to the fact that that they know that future family responsibilities could restrain their availability to dedicate themselves fully to managing their business.. This is what is shown through Daniela's words: *“I had even thought about buying some new premises.... but quite honestly the prices are out of my reach and so I have given up. I am fine as I am and I can manage to pay the rent each month. Taking on another mortgage - we are talking about € 300.000 which would be a problem because I am also thinking about relaxing my work schedule a bit and of having a family and so I need to find some free time for myself and I wouldn't be able to do that if I had a large mortgage.”*

## **2.2. The family as a support**

Apart from being a source of obligation and responsibility, the family can play an essential role in the female working world by providing support. It is possible to distinguish

three main forms of support: psychological, financial and materialistic (Klyver, 2011; Bara, Bhargava, 2011; Kargwell, 2008). This role of support, in its various declinations, is often indispensable until it becomes a *conditio sine qua non* as far as the woman can carry out an entrepreneurial activity. This is a condition which is exclusive to females and cannot be found in their male counterparts, so much so that it can be considered as an element of vulnerability in female entrepreneurs.

A first form of support can be considered as a moral and psychological form which can be seen when the family agrees with and encourages the woman's choice.

For married women it is often the husband who plays a fundamental role in convincing her to start up a business and to overcome her initial doubts and uncertainties. This is evident from Stefania, the owner of a small firm in the textile sector. *"I began working for myself in 2000. Initially I worked with another girl. Previously I had worked for 25 years in craftwork near Urbania. After 25 years I said to myself: "I'm 40 and if I want to do something, I'll have to do it now or not at all."*

Sometimes husbands or partners don't just provide encouragement and moral support for the entrepreneur but often make sacrifices with her, face the difficulties of running a firm and share, not so much the practical and operative management of the activity, but also the elaboration and start-up phases. Business women often affirm that they wouldn't have been able to handle the worries of starting a business without the support of a husband or partner, most of all with other family commitments, especially as a parent.

For women who are not married, it is the consent and support from their parents which represents a fundamental resource regarding the decision to start her own business. This is confirmed by Sara, the owner of a wellness center: *In my experience, the family represents a psychological, emotional, financial and economic support with its constant presence and perhaps my family and I decided to go through with this precisely because we were united and because each one of us could count on the other."*

Even Daniela who owns a beauty centre recognises how the consensus of the birth family represents an intangible resource which is indispensable in starting up and developing a female-run firm:

*"For me, my family is a great support, not only financially, but also psychological and morally.*

*If it were not for my father and mother, but especially for my father, I would never have made the decision and received the help that my father gave me to get the mortgage of the house ... This activity was what I wanted but there were many doubts, uncertainties and fears. My parents gave me the courage to make up my mind and to overcome my uncertainties. My mother used to tell me, for example "You're a woman, you are facing a demanding time, so what will you do when you have a family?". In fact, their help was indispensable and still is because I live with them and my time is dedicated entirely to my work, apart from a little 'personal time for myself, but only at little. " (Dany)*

Daniela's experience also shows that the family can provide fundamental financial support. The family's intervention also can assume the important role of mediators with the bank, often preventing difficult situations. This is often quite common in several female experiences in which the family plays a decisive role, not only in making it possible to obtain financing but also in offering indispensable knowledge and competences to compensate the woman's inexperience and therefore strengthening her contractual power in negotiations with the banking institutions. In the experience of many of the interviewees, this support has, in most cases, involved a male component from the birth or marriage family: *"In my working experience I have taken on two mortgages but I have not had any problems with the banks. They have been very helpful and my husband helped me by signing for me."* (Stefania)

As well as being a guarantor, for some business women, the help from a family member is justified by the desire to assist in negotiations with the bank institutions. These circumstances are sometimes, especially in younger women, the perception that they come up against a certain «*difficulty in being taken seriously*», a situation which can induce the presence of a male figure in relations with the banks, in requesting financing and in negotiating over to her father: “*My father looks after the financial side of the firm and I run the business, including the internal accountancy, the organization of the personnel and all the rest. Therefore, when there is a problem with the bank, he looks after it.*”.

Another situation whereby the family intervenes is when the woman receives some material and concrete support in managing the commitments which fall to a woman entrepreneur. These are mainly about looking after children and from this point of view the family takes part as a source of helping to resolve the problems of dealing with the role of being a business woman, mother and wife at the same time. More often than not, the collaboration comes from a female figure while husbands are less involved. In fact, women often complain that their husbands, while supporting them psychologically, are less helpful in domestic issues. The parents’ role is evident in the words of Elena, the owner of an agricultural firm which produces olive oil: “*My son is still little and so I believe it is very important that I should dedicate my time to him, especially in his first year. I really think that if I hadn’t had my family I would have dedicated less time to my work and this would have been apparent.*”

This issue brings the theme of conciliation to the front. For the female entrepreneur, the balance between work commitments and family responsibilities represents one of the biggest challenges to overcome. Help from the family is often the only practical solution, especially when childcare facilities are scarce and the family income does not allow for private care (e.g. a babysitter). At the same time it is very satisfying for a woman to be able to show to herself and others that she has managed to overcome this problem. It is this point which differentiates between the male and female work experience because even if they are fathers as well, men do not have to deal with the problem of the conciliation and the daily management of their family and it is very rare that they take on the responsibility of family commitments.

### **2.3. The family as an opportunity**

In some cases the family can insert itself in the female entrepreneurial life as a source of opportunity. In particular here we are referring to the case in which the *family business* represents a chance, not only as a job, but also as a form of professional and self fulfillment for the woman who comes from a family with an entrepreneurial tradition.

Two different circumstances can be identified. The first is the possibility of the woman who belongs to a business family and who finds a form of personal and professional fulfillment in the family business. The family can encourage the entrepreneurial career choice by a daughter and can favour the start of her own activity. The result of this is that it would be more difficult for a woman who does not come from this type of background. Family and family businesses can be a place for forming a new entrepreneurial identity in its capacity to transmit the values and behaviour which are required in the world of work.

This is the case with Valeria, the daughter of the founder of a small firm in the building sector. Valeria chose to enter into the family firm, influenced by the great admiration she felt for her father and the values he had transmitted to her, which were all orientated towards commitment, achieving objectives and taking care to follow the process leading to the product, as well as an open mind towards change and innovation. When she was asked “*What values has your father taught you?*”, the entrepreneur answered: “*Above all commitment. Never go back. Never. In anything. My father was like that even when I was*

*small.... he is a person who expects a lot and he is like that at work, he'll throw you in at the deep end and then he will say to you 'swim, because i know you can'...my father always says "if there is a problem you can't resolve by facing it front on, you must try to change your approach to it and this is something that I always say too".*

As shown with Valeria, who is gradually replacing her father in directing the firm, the entrepreneurial tendency of daughters can be concretized through succession. Until this happens, however, it is vital that the senior generation is not masculinistic and is not against handing the firm over to a female. At the same time it is indispensable that the transmission of the role as the leader of the family business to a female is not opposed or blocked by brothers who want the role themselves.

In Teresa's case, the daughter of the owner of medium-sized firm which operates in the mechanical sector, the succession at the helm of the family firm appears to be problematic due to her brother desiring the same role. Indeed, Teresa seems aware that "*when my father decides in whose hands he should leave the firm, he will choose my brother.*" But this fact does not seem to upset Teresa's calm because her system of values, the integrity and the survival of the firm, like the serenity and unity of the family, assume an unquestionable priority. She says she is willing to offer her experience in the firm alongside her brother. She believes that there must be harmony between the two siblings for the future of the firm and its objectives, because "*even though there are some differences, sometimes big ones, within the firm, our family is always united*". Therefore it is the family that is central in Teresa's entrepreneurial experience, not only because it has offered Teresa a future in entrepreneurship, but also because it is in the name of the family that Teresa herself declares she is ready to take a step back in favour of her brother.

The family can also represent a work opportunity for a woman. This happens when the woman has difficulty in finding a job or has experienced unpleasant situations in her workplace (the glass ceiling, work-life balance and so on). Under these circumstances the family business can represent the only opportunity of having a job and earning a wage. The family business can offer the possibility of working in a more flexible and adaptable environment with the result of making the conciliation between work and family more adaptable.

#### **2.4. Family as a form of generational continuity**

The generational continuity is a critical point for a firm and in order to face such critical periods it is important to be aware of the two main subjects involved (the successor and the succeeded) in order for the transition of the *leadership* to go well. This having been said, some research shows that female entrepreneurs show more care and are better prepared to face the generational change, thank also to their *leadership* qualities which are founded on flexibility, on teamwork and paying attention to each person. (Studi Centro Veneto, 2002; Sentuti, 2008).

While the male entrepreneur appears to be more able of closing the firm when he goes, for the female entrepreneur, seeing the continuity of her own firm seems only natural, we could say almost genetic. It is possible to maintain that women, contrary to men, even when they have the role of a business woman running a firm, they never put their parental role to one side and they follow their children's growth and see them develop and get to know them well.

But we should also remember that the male succession of a family firm cannot always be taken for granted. For female entrepreneurs, it is rarely taken for granted that her successor will be male in that they have a greater ability to respect the vocations and aspirations of their own children.

Maria, for example, is the founder of a firm in the Marche region.

*"I was hoping that my company would become great, my dream was to live well with my family and my mission was to provide a home for my children. I followed them and I did not want to make the sacrifices that I had to when I was a kid. I did it. I like to live without overdoing it, and I achieved all my goals. I'm glad because I did not ask anything from anyone: I did it myself. "* (Maria)

We can say that female entrepreneurs who consider their family as an element of generational continuity can be defined as parents in two senses. The first in business because they are women who have found an entrepreneurial idea which is produced and therefore 'generated' by a woman, and in her personal life because they are women who have a close relationship with their children, who never leave their parental role and are often transferred in the typical working environment so much so that we could add that the relationship between the business and family dimensions in this case is amplified and the two dimensions almost overlap each other.

### **2.5. The Family as a form of giving up**

In some cases it is possible that work and its consequent commitments plant themselves in the personal dimension of a woman, determining having to give up on the idea of starting the family. We refer to the female entrepreneur who is unmarried and who decides not to start a family due to her work commitments and the difficulties in reconciling work and family. We must underline that is not always seen by the woman as a free or voluntary choice but often comes about as a ready-made decision because she understands a sense of responsibility that allows her to realise that it is not simple to reconcile work and family and might need a commitment which is beyond her capacity. This giving up, in these terms, seems to be a choice in order to avoid ignoring one of the two dimensions .

The theme of giving up starting a family is presented because it represents a problem which is typically and exclusively female. We should point out that, if we had to present the role of the family in the male entrepreneurial experience, most probably we would not have posed this question and this theme would not have been dealt with in that , as far as it is possible to observe, it does not seem that a man's career constitutes an obstacle to his forming a family,

For Daniela, 28 ,unmarried and the owner of a beauty centre, a family is something she has had to give up on for now, in that the time she spends at work does not allow her to have a family or even a full private life. In the future, however, the family could become a restriction which would have an effect on her firm and probably limit its growth and development.

*"I must say that in ten tears of working I have always given my utmost and I have thought only about my work. Because I have never taken time from work for my private life, which has been sort of put to one side..... I realise that now I have given too much priority to my work. I am now in a relationship and I am trying to balance everything, also because I am soon going to live on my own and so I will have to get organized, do the shopping and think of other things. (Daniela)*

### **Concluding remarks and implications for future research**

The implications of these observations about the unbreakable bond existing between female entrepreneurs and their families are particularly interesting.. Under a methodological profile, the main conclusion of our analysis is that female entrepreneurial experiences – a woman's choice to become an entrepreneur and the characteristics of her business – cannot be truly understood if attention is not paid to the family dimension, too. This latter aspect underlines a very profound difference between the entrepreneurial experiences of men and

women, as it is very difficult to find similar situations where men entrepreneurs are analyzed. Under a sociological point of view, this analysis should help to better focus one of the key issues of a woman's life when she tries to balance family life with her work and her professional aspirations. This means that in order to support women entrepreneurship is essential to address this issue. It is important to know and understand the role that the family plays in women entrepreneurial experiences in order to clearly interpret the reasons of women-owned businesses' success or failure, as family ties will inevitably have an impact on their performances.

As this study has examined only some microenterprises run by women in the centre of in Italy, it could be influenced by the specific socio-economic conditions of the district. Additionally, the results are based on our interpretation of the data and are thus our interpretation of the evidence. As such we advise that the lessons learned from this study are meant to inform the reader of what to look out for when investigating or working with women run micro-enterprises and their close relationship with the family.

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