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Research article

Abilities and skills as factors explaining the differences in women entrepreneurship



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ABSTRACT

This study takes part of the project *Women and entrepreneurship from a competence perspective* and aims to investigate the role of skills and abilities in explaining the women entrepreneurship. In this sense, it works on the idea that women entrepreneurs have specific competences, understood as the sum of skills and abilities, that characterize and determine the type of female entrepreneurship (typology, sector, size, innovation, creativity). Methodologically, it worked from a qualitative approach, supported by conducting semi-structured interviews of men and women from different socio-economic and business profiles. From an inductive and interpretive discursive analysis, it can be concluded that businessmen and businesswomen agree to grant several skills and abilities to women entrepreneurs, although there are significant differences between the perceptions of women and men, subsisting some gender stereotypes in defining the profile of women entrepreneurs.

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Habilidades y destrezas como factores que explican las diferencias en la capacidad empresarial de las mujeres

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se enmarca dentro del proyecto de I+D+i *Mujer y capacidad empresarial desde una perspectiva competencial* y tiene como objetivo examinar el papel que desempeñan las habilidades y destrezas que poseen las mujeres a la hora de explicar la capacidad empresarial de éstas. En este sentido, se trabaja sobre la idea de que las mujeres emprendedoras cuentan con unas competencias específicas, entendidas como la suma de habilidades y destrezas, que caracterizan y determinan el tipo de capacidad empresarial femenina (tipología, sector, dimensiones, innovación y creatividad). A nivel metodológico se trabajó a partir

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de un enfoque cualitativo apoyado en la realización de entrevistas semiestructuradas a hombres y mujeres de diferentes perfiles tanto socioeconómicos como empresariales. A partir de un análisis discursivo de carácter inductivo e interpretativo se puede concluir que el empresariado coincide en otorgarles un buen número de habilidades y destrezas a las mujeres emprendedoras si bien existen diferencias significativas entre las percepciones de las mujeres y las de los varones ya que todavía subsisten algunos estereotipos de género a la hora de definir el perfil de las empresarias.

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Introduction

According to the theory of economic development of [Schumpeter \(1942\)](#), economic development rests on the capacity for innovation of entrepreneurs in creating new businesses. In this way, the entrepreneur has grown in importance since he or she reveals as an innovator, organizer and as an agent that enables economic growth. Thus, entrepreneurship is an activity that is seen as favourable for economic growth through job creation, innovation and wealth ([GEM, 2014](#)).

The figure of businessman or the entrepreneur has been traditionally associated with the male, due in part because the attributes that are associated with this activity are understood to be strictly male. What might collaborate, as recognized in the GEM Report (2012), to entrepreneurial activity in Spain is more suitable for men than women.

According to that report on Spain, there are no significant differences in the profile of women and men entrepreneurs because of age (around 38 years) and a family nucleus of belonging (3 members). However, the differences are observed with regard to the level of studies – higher in women; income – higher in men; sector of the activity – women in consumption and men in technological activities; and the geographical origin – the entrepreneurship of foreign origin is higher among women. Other notable distinguishing features are, first, less optimism by the women regarding growth prospects of the company and, secondly, the motivation to undertake appears linked to the need factor to a greater extent in women than in men.

The previous contextualization allows us to minimally outline the current state of entrepreneurship in our country and its distinctions when we introduce the gender variable, but beyond that general approach, this paper aims to make an approach to female entrepreneurship from a competence perspective and specifically it tries to know, through the discourse of entrepreneurs, if consensus exists when a series of specific skills and abilities that could contribute or hinder the development of this entrepreneurial activity by women is established.

In this regard, it is clear that the task of undertaking requires general skills – and some specific – that must be acquired and developed for this task to be successful ([Alda-Varas, Villardoñ-Gallego, & Elexpuru-Albizuri, 2012](#)). In this sense, the [ANECA \(2007\)](#) considers the existence of five general competence groups that should be considered when demanded by the labour market: those related to the knowledge, critical thinking, time management, organization and communication.

On the development of skills on the part of the entrepreneurs, these skills are also put into practice and manifest as a series of knowledge, like skills for adaptation and flexibility and skills for proactivity and negotiation – favouring the qualification of people and the successful development of their entrepreneurial activity ([Olaz, 2011](#)).

But just as men and women learn and behave differentially, perhaps the entrepreneurial activities are undertaken under different patterns. And although the uses and business procedures seem built in a neutral way, there is a strong masculinization of entrepreneurial activity, so that the experiences and results of women entrepreneurs still are analyzed in comparison with the male norm and, by deferring it, they are generally understood as deficient ([Jiménez & Díaz, 2011](#)). Therefore, as [Pineda \(2014\)](#) points out, it is necessary to study the entrepreneurial initiative of women and men attending the gender structure of entrepreneurship, since otherwise they would be studied by neutral and universal entrepreneurs patterns that reflect only practices and proper male ideals in entrepreneurial action.

Catering to this demand of specific analysis for gender implies agreeing that the concept of entrepreneurship is socially and culturally constructed, so that, like other aspects that make social action, they should be analyzed from the reproduction of practices learned through a differential socialization process by gender. The theory of differential socialization ([Giddens, 2010](#)) states that women internalize values, norms and codes other than the man in the process of socialization transmitted behaviour patterns and differential expectations for children, which could lead to uneven development of skills, such as perseverance, prudence or empathy attributed more to women, or the security and independence attributes generally of masculine cut. In this process, the development of skills could also be differential, refining some skills above others in terms of gender. Together, these abilities and skills learned and developed differentially might influence (positively or negatively) the undertaken action, moderating unevenly in women and men.

There is interest, therefore, to know what skills and abilities are commonly attributed to women entrepreneurs from the point of view of the women themselves exercising their corporate responsibilities, and from the point of view of men entrepreneurs. To do this, the discourses of a number of businessmen and businesswomen with different socio-demographic and occupational profiles have been analyzed, which allows to go in depth, both in competence characteristics subjectively considered treasured for women

entrepreneurs, and those considered ideal for a successful woman entrepreneurial.

Abilities and skills: a theoretical review

The study of the concepts of abilities and skills involves the consideration that both items belong, along with the knowledge, to the broader field of competence (Olaz, 2011).

Regarding the concept of competence and its definition, there have been and are a multitude of approaches. The first approach may be as to McClelland (1973), who posed competence as anything that allows improved performance of a task. In an attempt to collect the many definitions of this concept, Moreno, Pelayo, and Vargas (2004) have considered other ones that belong to authors, such as Boyatzis (1982, p. 21), which defined the competences as “characteristics underlying the person who can relate to their skills, traits or a set of knowledge”; Spencer and Spencer (1993) that considered latent personal characteristics that allow the effective exercise of a task; or Cantera (1999), who delineated personal characteristics – knowledge, skills and attitudes – that may favour success.

This paper elaborates on the analysis of two of the elements that make up the area of competence: the abilities and skills. Regarding abilities, it can be said that they are particular elements of an individual's personality that allow the execution of tasks and determine the successful development of such a task or activity. In the words of Olaz (2011, p. 610), they are seen as “the potential associated with the natural characteristics of the individual to manage certain situations.”

That said, it can be understood that skills are only related to the innate characteristics of the individual. However, skills are socially conditioned by the family and the school as fundamental agencies of socialization. Moreover, not only are they manifested in the proper execution of the task but also in the design of it and in the process leading to the formation of competencies (Suárez, Dusú, & Sánchez, 2007).

In terms of skills, they can be defined, as does the European Commission (2009) on the European Qualifications Framework, as the ability of the individual to the application of knowledge in order to perform tasks and solve problems through the use of any technique. Sennett (2008) believes that skills are practices that are a result of training and not by inspiration. And in the words of Olaz (2011, p. 610), they are considered as “not necessarily innate skills, not even suspected by the individual, who, being «discovered» and trained, allow a better development of the person in their relationship with the environment”.

Cobo (2012) establishes the existence of hard and soft skills. The first are acquired through training and through them specific knowledge and skills are applied. Soft skills are acquired through training and practice, being related to the tacit knowledge gained through the process of socialization.

As can be seen, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between skills and abilities and in fact terminological imprecision leads sometimes to confusion. It is also important to note that although both capabilities and skills are elements or characteristics of the individual, they cannot be acquired if not through a training process of learning and training whether

formal or informal, nor can they manifest only when they are applied in a given context.

Women and entrepreneurship: skills and abilities as differential factors

The act of undertaking is not universal and unchanging over time, and so the start of the subsequent development activity follows different contextual elements – opportunities offered by environment, and personal and individual characteristics possessed by the entrepreneur – that analyzed together help explain the actual rates of entrepreneurship in a certain region and historical moment (Ormeño, 2014).

Both factors, exogenous and endogenous, seem to differentially affect women and men, since as noted above from the data of the GEM Report (2012), the entrepreneurship has a gender bias, women being less active in this task than men. This is so to such an extent that some authors note that the approximate global ratio is 70–30 (Ortiz, Duque, & Camargo, 2008). But it is also different not only in the overall rate of entrepreneurial activity in men and women, but also in the desire or intention of starting a business, motivations and barriers faced by women and men at the time of undertaking and attributes associated with entrepreneurial profile by gender (Fuentes & Sánchez, 2010).

From an extensive review of the literature on women and entrepreneurship, Castiblanco (2013) agreed to emphasize that gender is a moderating element of entrepreneurship, since the activities of self-employed men and women have characteristics that are conditioned by cultural factors (assumed roles, differentiated socialization) and social factors (institutional support, expectations), and certainly also individual factors, as the capacities and skills that have one and the other finally determine and characterize their projects.

In a similar vein, Álvarez, Rebollo, and Rodríguez (2013) stress that when women face the task of undertaking they face facilitator and blocker elements, both individually and socially, that generally are specific factors and distinct from those barriers and opportunities that men have. Among the blocking factors are mainly external factors, such as difficulties in reconciling work and family life, while among the facilitators those that mainly stand out are individual cutting issues, as some skills and abilities are developed mainly by women as management practice, a sense of responsibility or versatility, and which moved to vision and business management as added values.

Elaborating on this issue related to the individual aspects, Romo, Suárez, and Llamas (2007) identify common features in the profiles and skills of women entrepreneurs: commitment, intuition, adaptability, discipline, the tendency to cooperate, the ability to delegate authority, tolerance to frustration or finding efficiency and effectiveness, among others, which are factors present in the projects of women who have started a business and that, overall, could be collaborated to develop successful projects. In any case, there is agreement to emphasize that men and women do not start with higher or lower capacities and skills, but that they tend to be different, so that sometimes they would collaborate and others may hinder the task of undertaking.

In this sense, for [Ferreiro \(2013\)](#), women do not feel less capable to develop entrepreneurial projects, but it seems that men develops in higher grade capabilities that could be seen as more related to this activity: higher risk tolerance, greater competitiveness, ability to perceive business opportunities or to develop business networks, etc. All this could help explain, among other factors, most entrepreneurial activity of men.

In addition, not only is there a difference in measuring actual skills acquired and developed by women and men, but even seemingly informal factors, such as own perception of both society and women; the perception that women themselves have of their skills as entrepreneurs is different. This is no small matter, since according to [Álvarez, Noguera, and Urbano \(2012\)](#), the perception of entrepreneurial skills has a positive effect on the final decision to start a business, and this is especially true, according to these authors, in the case of women.

It is curious, however, that these perceptions vary when asked to the population in general and when the question is made to the entrepreneurs themselves. Thus, [Ruiz, Coduras, and Camelo \(2012\)](#) conclude that although higher levels of self-confidence, risk tolerance, ability to recognize business opportunities and a greater entrepreneurial intention in the male population than in the female are observed in the population in general, when the question is made directly to men and women with entrepreneurial projects underway, no significant differences were observed in these perceptual factors. Or put another way, women entrepreneurs see themselves in similar terms to their male counterparts, equaling to them by overcoming the socially constructed stereotypes.

The self-perception of its attributes is also being studied in the work of [Sánchez and Fuentes \(2013\)](#). The differential aspect of this research is that the answers of university students are analyzed, that is to say, investigated for the perception of their own abilities with those who could be future entrepreneurs. The differences here are also relevant, since men are considered with biggest initiative, creativity, self-confidence, optimism and tolerance against a possible failure, while women are seen as more self-disciplined and willing to endure longer to get results, more rigorous at work and with more risk aversion. Therefore, and as seems to be concluded from these results, men and women have self-conferred competences that could contribute to entrepreneurial activity. The point is that, in general terms, the results of this study show that entrepreneurial predisposition remains lower among women, perhaps because of the increased risk aversion that is recognized, or perhaps, as indicated by [Ventura and Quero \(2013\)](#), because the intention of undertaking in the case of women depends on a greater number of variables. Put in other words, the attitude conducive to entrepreneurship is more affected by conditions in the case of women than in men.

Finally, like any social phenomenon, the explanation to the different intentions and entrepreneurial activities of men and women has many causes, but among the most important seems to be the perception, acquisition and development of skills and abilities, that if not determined, then at least must result in moderating the business project by gender.

Methodological aspects of the analysis

This research is designed from a qualitative methodology focused on conducting semi-structured interviews to a group of women and men entrepreneurs, managers of companies located in the Region of Murcia, which have different socio-economic and professional profiles. The selection of the people who participated in the research, 5 men and 5 women, was done under the criteria of structural or typological sampling, with the objective of ensuring the discursive significance within the reality under study. To do this, the following aspects or stratification variables were considered: (a) branches of activity: companies or businesses from different business sectors; (b) experience: business entrepreneurs with different backgrounds; (c) management leadership: men and women founders and/or directors and successors of second or successive generations within the company.

The objectives of this work are presented as to (1) analyze what competence issues are presented by female entrepreneurship and try to (2) define the specific competence profile of women entrepreneurs to (3) learn the skills and abilities that promote entrepreneurship and also those that they limit.

For the development of the interviews, a structured script by thematic blocks related to the general objectives of the research was designed. Specifically, for this paper, we wanted to address the subjective perception that businesswomen and businessmen have and about what competences the businesswomen treasure, as that could help to understand the female entrepreneurship at present, as well as a prospective approach to the qualities that are taken as ideal and that, according to the respondents, should result in a successful woman entrepreneur.

After the realization of the interviews, we proceeded to transcribe, prepare and organize the material resulting from the fieldwork. The information processing was done using the Atlas-Ti programme, creating primary documents from the transcripts, which were read and analyzed textually for the identification and creation of codes and categories. Specifically for this work, we proceeded to analyze the questions 3 and 8, included in the interview script that was used for the fieldwork.

The speech of managers about skills and abilities perceived in the woman entrepreneurship

The analysis of the narratives of businessmen and businesswomen on the characteristics of female entrepreneurship allows to observe what are the terms used by each of them and how women and men are associated with certain capabilities and skills – not always coincident – to women entrepreneurship.

Starting with the abilities that allow understanding and assessing the current female entrepreneurship ([Fig. 1](#)), it should be noted first that both businessmen and businesswomen mention a significant number of capacities, which unveils that in the social imaginary of entrepreneurship,



Fig. 1 – Relation of abilities that businesswomen have. Orange: outstanding abilities only by women; Green: outstanding abilities only by men; Brown: abilities highlighted both by women as by men.

women appear as a trained agent to perform its function. In addition, all the mentioned capabilities are facilitators of entrepreneurial activity, both those that are specific to a male norm entrepreneur as those that are more typical of female norm.

Among the abilities considered more frequently in women as in men's discourse are perseverance (displayed on 2 occasions in the female discourse and 6 in the male one), empathy (3 and 2, respectively), organizational skills (2 and 1, respectively), efficiency (1 and 2, respectively) and diversification (1 and 2 respectively).

In the women's discourse the abilities most marked are self-security (appears 4 times), and the courage and ability to assume risk (appears 3 times).

The self-confidence, the trust that you are able to do, and take the risk, to say that although I cannot get it right I will do it (E3-Women).

Meanwhile, in the men's speech, the most important skills to understand female entrepreneurship are inquisitiveness and self-sufficiency, and perseverance (shown 6 times each).

Persevering, insistent, it cannot leave the project at the first moment because surely are going to come many bad times and will have to overcome them (E6-Man).

Therefore, although some matches are appreciated, we found a significantly different association in the discourse of women and men when referring to the abilities that businesswomen believe they have. Only men set out abilities like social sensitivity, the ability of personal attention and patience that have traditionally been associated with the acquits of female abilities.

The woman certainly has, I think in general, and of course talking about maximum and not of absolute truths, more social sensitivity (E10-Man).

This may indicate the persistence of a male speech in which gender stereotypes have an important role. While on the contrary, it is only women who consider their own abilities, such as self-improvement and, above all, courage and risk-taking, which are recognized as male capabilities, according to multiple studies collected by Ruiz et al. (2012). This could indicate that women entrepreneurs have begun to renounce the traditional discourse influenced by gender stereotypes.

Ability to self-improvement, that is to say, be present, plant yourself and know that every day you will learn something new. Everyday someone poking you in your comfort zone and you are the whole day testing yourself (E4-Women).

The main competence is to swallow the fear, saying, "I will take the step, I'm going to risk, the risk." (E3-Women).

Regarding the skills that enable to understand and appreciate female entrepreneurship, it has also been considered both terminology repetition and its association with the traits that characterize the entrepreneurial female profile (Fig. 2). Thus, it has been observed that the most important skills for both men and women are the leadership skills and those relevant to the organization of a company (both appear on 2 occasions in the women's discourse and 1 in the male one).

The woman proved to be more effective than the man in the organization of personnel, organization of the accounts and, ultimately, to organize a business (E1-Women).

Some women have shown great capacity of command (E8-Man).

In any case, although both businesswomen and businessmen indicate different skills, businesswomen have not always agreed in their analysis. When women think and verbalize the businesswomen's skills, they are referring to communication and the use of new technologies. Two interesting skills, by its importance in the job performance of most business leaders today, but paradoxically are not made visible as belonging to businesswomen, according to the men interviewed. In any case, although women set out their own technology skills, they dedicate their entrepreneurial activity in service sectors rather than technological, which are more typical of men (GEM, 2012). Meanwhile, men link to businesswomen the skill

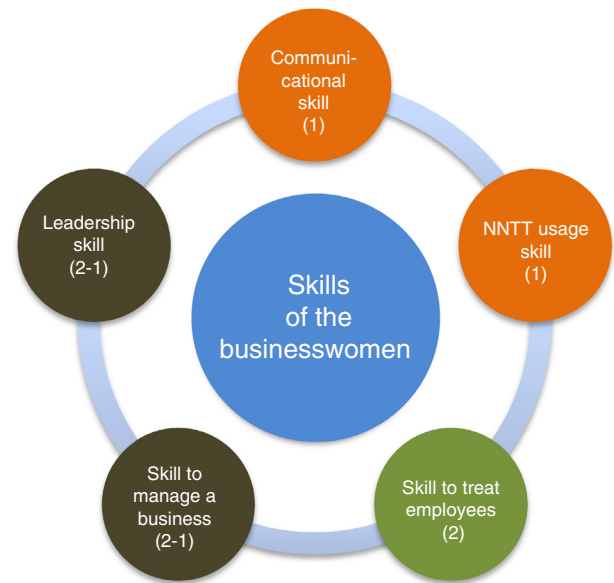


Fig. 2 – Relation of skills that businesswomen have. Orange: outstanding skills only by women; Green: outstanding skills only by men; Brown: skills highlighted both by women as by men.



Fig. 3 – Relation of abilities that the businesswoman 10 should have, explicit by gender. Orange: outstanding abilities only by women; Green: outstanding abilities only by men; Brown: abilities highlighted both by women as by men.



Fig. 4 – Relation of skills that the businesswoman 10 should have explicit by gender. Orange: outstanding skills only by women; Green: outstanding skills only by men; Brown: skills highlighted both by women as by men.

to treat employees. However, this quality does not appear on the female discourse.

I think it's easier to find a good female director of human resources than a good man director of human resources. I believe that women have more empathy and may be better personnel director (E10-Man).

In what does seem to be a coincidence, it is that all outstanding skills in the male and female discourses can be considered facilitators of entrepreneurship, including those that can be understood more as belonging to the female norm of entrepreneur, such as communication and dealing with the employees.

Besides knowing the perception of the current competencies that holds women entrepreneurs, the analysis seeks to go a step further and try to uncover which are the ideal traits that managers consider to have the perfect entrepreneur.

In this regard, and starting again by abilities, it could highlight various significant results as regard to the profile of the entrepreneur 10 or the perfect one (Fig. 3). Thus, it is seen that the most important ability for both women and men is the one that corresponds to the assumption of multiple roles at the same time efficiently (appears on 2 occasions in the women's discourse and 4 times in the male one) but we should also mention the capacity referred to perseverance (1 and 4, respectively). These two abilities are the most significant in the male discourse; however, the most important in their

repetition in women's discourse are, beside the ability to take on several roles at the same time, creativity, the ability to manage frustration and failure and self-confidence (shown in 2 occasions).

The entrepreneur 10 is someone who can balance their work and family life very well and do well in both cases (E5-Women).

You have to organize your frustration but that goes into creativity (E5-Women).

So in terms of the abilities that should treasure the businesswoman 10 or the perfect one, the discourse underlying the capacity mentioned more often in the male and female discourses is remarkable. Both men and women considered the ability of women to conciliate family private space and the public space of their entrepreneurial activity essential. This fact is indicative of the persistence of a gender discourse, more common in men than in women. It is anticipated that the perfect businesswoman should know to conciliate, which can become a problem for the female entrepreneurship, to devote part of their time away from a productive space.

Finally, the repetition and association of entrepreneurship skills related to the businesswoman 10 or the perfect one (Fig. 4) were also measured. It is noted that for both women and men interviewed, the ability to treat people and workers is the most important (listed on 1 occasion in the women's discourse and 2 in the male one). The leadership abilities are relevant

for women (appearing on 3 occasions in his discourse), while for men the skills to manage the enterprise and achieve profitability, and management skills (are spoken in 2 occasions) would be significant. All of them would be relevant facilitators of female entrepreneurship.

Again differences can be seen in relation to the nature of the skills outlined in the female and male discourse. In the last one, the skills while not hard are close to this, while skills considered by women are all of the soft type or deal with tacit knowledge.

Conclusions

The abilities and skills are a key element along with the knowledge for the consideration of the skills – and thus the qualifications – for workers and entrepreneurs.

Differences in male and female discourse regarding the abilities and skills of women entrepreneurs indicate how the perception of entrepreneurship is a social construction. So, this fact is understood differently by men and women, being the result of education and social interaction whose development depends on the social contexts (Ahl, 2006).

In the stories that women and men make about entrepreneurship, it has been able to identify a gender discourse that is reflected in the way that entrepreneurs provide abilities that have traditionally been considered as belonging to women. When the ability to assume multiple roles efficiently is granted to the women entrepreneur 10 or the perfect one by male entrepreneurs, they do keeping in mind the balance between family and work life. And although stereotypes persist in the female discourse, a change to consider abilities that have no direct association with the sphere of social values and behaviours attributed to women is seen.

This fact indicates that the exercise of entrepreneurial activity by women generates the consideration of own abilities and skills and sometimes far from the general discourse of women who are not entrepreneurs.

Traditionally and historically, the figure of entrepreneur has matched that of men and, therefore, with their skills and abilities; and perhaps this is the reason why male discourse remains particularly valuing the qualities of masculine cut when the profile of the perfect female entrepreneur is outlined.

In short, the male and female patterns on the figure of the entrepreneur are different, but both provide abilities and skills of female norm. Among them, there are individual abilities more specific to women, such as perseverance, the more social and relational abilities – ability to treat people with empathy or social sensitivity – and those skills more related to tacit knowledge, as dealing with people and communication.

These abilities and skills are an advantage over the characteristics of the male norm, as they are facilitators of the development of entrepreneurship. Not only because both men and women consider the skills and abilities of the women norm as part of the ideal of the entrepreneur woman, but because they are also considered as demanded in the labour market by institutions like the ANECA.

Therefore, all the skills and abilities of women entrepreneurs verbalized in the male and female discourses

are facilitators of the entrepreneurial activity of women, except for maybe the obligation to acquire the capacity for conciliation, capacity that the male is not supposed to have. In our view, the already initiated overcoming of the stereotypes will be the most useful tool for the elimination of barriers that limit women entrepreneurship.

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