Women and Men Leading Artisan Firms:
What is the Impact on Organizations?

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Abstract

In the current economic and employment crisis, women-run enterprises represent an important opportunity to create new jobs and stimulate innovation. This article presents the results of empirical and comparative research based on ten case studies of small artisan firms. The study compared five small enterprises led by women with five extremely similar firms where the entrepreneurs were men. This article discusses the different styles of leadership and analyses in which way they produce different personal satisfaction and different means to create support organizational networks for both business and personal life.

The results of the study suggest several implications for policy-making.

Introduction

In recent years, female entrepreneurship has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars and policy-makers. The first wave of studies focused on parity and social inclusion in order to understand and overcome discrimination against women. More recently, female entrepreneurship has been seen as a source of job creation and as a new way of working (de Bruin, Brush and Welter 2007; Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter and Welter 2012): in Italy women-run enterprises constitute 23,5% of the national total, but in 2012 they registered a higher birth rate than the men-run ones (Osservatorio Imprenditoria femminile Unioncamere-InfoCamere 2013).

The study of enterprises run by women and, more generally, of female work are indeed fundamental issues not only for improving equality and social justice, but also for promoting economic growth and social development. For this reason, any policy that supports the participation of women in the job market has a particular importance and deserves to be enhanced.

Acknowledging this relevance, the OECD recently highlighted the need for further research on female entrepreneurship, as well as for the promotion of targeted and effective interventions (2012).

This study moves in that direction and includes an additional element not found in previous research. In this study we aim to identify, in the activities of women entrepreneurs, elements that can be useful to implement women-related policies even for employees. The hypothesis behind this research is that in small enterprises women entrepreneurs are able to enact practices that overcome some of the environmental constraints they face in order to better reconcile their different needs, and that this capacity can in turn provide important insights on the wider debate on female labour.

The paper focuses on three main issues: the reconciliation of the responsibility of running an enterprise with a family life; the leadership style of women entrepreneurs, in a

comparative perspective, and its impact on the working environment; the nature and structure of the networks that support woman entrepreneurs.

We aim to identify the impact of the two different styles of leadership (male and female) using two particularly meaningful indicators: the level of satisfaction of the male/female entrepreneur and of his/her employees (par. 1); the advice network created by the subjects in charge of the organization and those that the male/female entrepreneur finds available outside his/her firm (par. 2).

Our purpose is to compare features that are traditionally analysed separately: on the one hand, the entrepreneur's point of view compared to the employees' point of view, and on the other hand the individual perceptions compared to the actual behaviours.

The research[1]—commissioned by Confartigianato Milano and Monza-Brianza in partnership with Federcasse Federazione italiana banche di credito cooperativo e casse rurali and carried out between March and July 2012—compares five small artisan firms run by women with five similar firms where the entrepreneurs are men. All firms are located in the Italian provinces of Milan and Monza-Brianza.

Chart 1 - Characteristics of the companies

Sector	Year founded	Year of birth (entrepreneur)	Seniority	Other shareholders	No. of employees	No. of respondents	Turnover (until now)
Building F	1988	1964	2002	1	6	7	€1,000,000
Building M	1987	1969	1987	1	5	5	€1,000,000
Cleaning F	2000	1940	2000	0	12	6	€500,000
Cleaning M	1989	1963	1989	1	20	6	€1,000,000
Construction (work at height) F	2011	1974	2011	3	1	4	€1,000,000
Construction (work at height) M	2008	1968	2008	0	7	4	€1,000,000
Hair salon F	1973	1953	1973	0	13	14	€500,000
Hair salon M	2002	1950	1982	3	12	14	€500,000
Carpentry F	1987	1970	1992	1	4	6	€500,000

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[1] This article shows a reworking of the results already presented in Bolis, M., De Vita, R., Fontana, A., Manzo, C. and Pais, I. (2012).

Carpentry M	1994	1980	2004	2	6	7	€2,000,000

For each firm, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the entrepreneur, his or her partners and colleagues and employees. In total, 73 interviews were conducted as follows:

- ten interviews with entrepreneurs, lasting an average of 75 minutes;

- nine interviews with shareholders, lasting an average of 20 minutes;

- fifty-four interviews with employees, lasting an average of 15 minutes.

The interviews with entrepreneurs explored the person's biographical details (personal and family history, everyday life), the characteristics of their company (history, characteristics and work organisation), social capital (personal and associative), financing policies, relations with local institutions and future prospects. The interviews with shareholders and employees covered their biographical details, the way they perceived the quality of their work and their level of job satisfaction.

Each interview provided a section of social network analysis: each interviewee was asked about his/her advice and friendship network inside the company and about his/her perception about the existing ties between colleagues.

1. Does Female Leadership Style Increase Satisfaction Inside the Company?

Many recent studies concerning gender specificities in entrepreneurship are focused on leadership (Rosener 1990; Cowling and Taylor 2001; David 2008; Gherardi 2008; Sullivan and Meek 2012). Recently, an interesting debate has emerged on gender, feminism and entrepreneurship. In particular, Ahl and Marlow (2012) argue that there is a persistent gender bias within the entrepreneurial discourse. They underline that the need for an epistemological shift in entrepreneurship research is urgent. In fact, current positivist epistemologies that focus on assumed innate sex differences will inevitably reproduce the "othering" of women. Even if we share this consideration, in the sampling of our research (which is certainly a small one), the men-entrepreneurs seem to have a so called

"male-leadership-style", while women-entrepreneurs seem to adopt a so called "female-leadership-style".

Existing studies found that female leadership has some specific characteristics: flexibility and adaptability, relation capabilities and a dialogic and interactive style for the network management. All these factors result to be fundamental for firms' competitiveness in the current economic context. Female leadership style is a "transformational" one (Bass 1990), based on communication and informality that can represent a key factor in uncertain conditions and that allows flexibility.

These specific features of women-led management also emerge in our research. Women managers are likely to base their leadership on dialogue, trust and collaboration, which they use to establish positive relationships with their employees.

Interviewed female entrepreneurs adopt a cooperative style and a participative approach, more than their male colleagues.

Speaking about this, a female entrepreneur stressed how her style differed from the one of her father (the firm founder) and the one of her brother (a partner in the company).

> If an employee needs half a day free, I don't say «you should have told me two weeks ago»: needs are needs. We know the situation of all employees, I know their wives, their children, and so this behaviour is natural for me… If you have to go to your children's teacher because your wife can't do it, there's no problem… but my father never accepted this condition, he always said: «It's impossible that his wife can't do it», because his mentality is like this and I try to make my brother [the partner] understand that as we have our needs, they have their needs and I think that we have to let them have their personal spaces.
>
> (Int. 1, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Building)

Women tend to encourage the sharing of power and information and they support their employees in empowerment, motivation and self esteem.

> I think that my employees are perfect for me […] Customers are sacred, but subordinates are also sacred: if your subordinate appreciates you, you can obtain the most he can do.
>
> (Int. 9, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Hair salon)

According to these elements, the first question that leaded our research was to state how the leadership style related to the level of satisfaction inside the company. In other words, we investigated whether or not the female style of management could create higher satisfaction inside the organization both from the employees' (1.1) and from the male/female entrepreneur's point of view (1.2).

1.1. The Employees' Satisfaction

During the research, we asked each employee to express his/her general satisfaction (on a 1 to 10 scale) about the job they do. In accordance with previous literature (Bergamante and Gualtieri 2012), the average of the results show high values (from 7,60 to 9,75) which are, however, difficult to relate directly to the gender of the company leader.

Together with the general satisfaction expressed about their job, the interviewees were also asked for an evaluation on more specific aspects of it.

The values emerging from these answers show a significant difference between men-led companies and women-led ones particularly related to two aspects: stress levels and the relation with the manager, as reported in the following chart.

Chart 2 – The Employees' evaluation (average of the results on a 1 to 10 scale)

Sector	Stress		Relation with the manager	
	Firm F	Firm M	Firm F	Firm M
Building	5,40	8,00	10,00	8,25
Cleaning	4,60	7,50	8,80	8,75
Work at height	7,00	5,00	8,00	9,33
Hair salon	6,08	7,46	9,15	7,77
Carpentry	4,75	7,80	9,25	7,80

Though these results cannot be generalized, we notice that 4 out of 5 cases of female-led company have employees that are more satisfied with their relation with the manager.

On the same level, the employees of the 4 companies whose leaders are women declare to be less stressed than their colleagues working in men-run companies.

A similar result emerged when the employees were asked to point out which were the most satisfactory aspects of their work.

A lot of women-led firms employees indicated in the relation with the company owner, in the sense of belonging to a group that works in a positive relational context and in the appreciation of every individual the most satisfactory aspects of their work.

> I'm satisfied about this job because this is a second family, I feel like being at home.
>
> (Int. 60, Employee, Female firm, Hair salon)

> Here the context is very good… perhaps, the aspect that I appreciate the most is the relation I have with the leaders.
>
> (Int. 45, Employee, Female firm, Carpentry)

> I'm happy because my boss recognizes my work: she appreciates what I do.
>
> (Int. 53, Employee, Female firm, Hair salon)

None of the employees working for male-led firms reported anything similar to the above results. In fact, some collaborators mentioned management style as a field in which they would like to see some changes and underlined the difficult relation with some entrepreneurs, due to their limited attitude in empowering employees.

> I wish there could be a better relation between leaders and employees.
>
> (Int. 50, Employee, Male firm, Carpentry)

> I would change the firm management, it would be necessary to motivate more the employees.
>
> (Int. 73, Employee, Male firm, Hair salon)

According to these results, we can go back to the question that leaded this part of our research and state that the female human resources management style promotes the creation of a relaxed, collaborative and transparent climate, which is very appreciated by the collaborators.

1.2. Female and Male Entrepreneurs' Satisfaction

Together with the employees' satisfaction, our research aimed to investigate the relationship between leadership style and the satisfaction of men and women entrepreneurs (an aspect that was scarcely studied in previous studies).

The entrepreneurs were asked to state, on a scale from 1 to 10, their level of satisfaction towards their employees. The comparison between the answers given by these two entrepreneurs (a woman and a man) is self-explanatory:

> From 1 to 10, my level of satisfaction is 10, though they don't know it. But this is a very small company, we have a family-like relationship.
>
> (Int. 7, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Carpentry)

> From 1 to 10? I would say 5… If I really try to be positive I can say 6, 6 and a half. Most of all, they don't feel responsible. They do things because they have seen someone else doing them, because they learned how to do them, but they haven't really assimilated them. If I hit something with a hammer I know why I'm doing it, they only do it because they have seen someone else doing it, but they haven't elaborated this action. They can't see beyond the end of their nose, despite the fact that they have good capacities. They are satisfied with what they have, that's their problem.
>
> (Int. 8, Entrepreneur, Male firm, Carpentry)

Women entrepreneurs generally declare to be more satisfied with their employees than men; they consider their employees as the strength of their firms, as precious resources, fundamental to reach the targets they have achieved during the years; male entrepreneurs, on the contrary, say that they have little trust in their employees and they admit that they would dismiss some of them if it were not for economic onerousness.

> How satisfied am I with my employees? I'll say 6 or 7, because even if you follow what they do or if you do things for them… Because some of them pretend to understand, but they actually only fool us. They say 'Yes I did that' and it is not true. We trust our employees a lot, and sometimes we get fooled in return. Because it is difficult to fire people these days, otherwise we could fire two or three of them that don't work very well.
>
> <div align="right">(Int. 6, Entrepreneur, Male firm, Cleaning)</div>

The fact that women are more satisfied with their employees is even more stressed in the words of this female entrepreneur, who is thinking of leaving the leadership of her company in the hands of those who are, at the moment, her employees.

> The years pass by and I need to create a staff that might be capable, one day, to take my place. This is my 5 year project, now.
>
> <div align="right">(Int. 9, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Hair salon)</div>

A second important aspect that emerges from the words of female entrepreneurs is related to the capacity of conciliation. A correct balance between work and family life is clearly essential to determine a good quality of life, and this seems even more true when entrepreneurs are women. In this case too we have to stress how fundamental the role of policy-making supporting the emancipation and the recognition of women's active role in the work market is. The concept of "double presence" (work and family) is central to describe the trade-offs in the achievement of satisfaction, as it essentially grasps the peculiarities and sensitivities of such balance for all women, though there certainly are differences due to age, marital status, type of work and personal scale of values.

Specifically, very often the female entrepreneurs interviewed were mothers and/or wives. The age of the entire sample (both male and female) was between 32 and 66, which means entrepreneurs were in different stages of their life and they often dealt with different family management problems. Although they started working at a young age, they decided to have children and tried to find a balance between family and work. The choice of self-employment seemed to help in the management of family life. None

of the respondents said that they started the company because of the desire to be more flexible and autonomous. However, they seemed to take advantage of the nature of self-employment as a way to reconcile a number of commitments to both work and life.

Being an entrepreneur is very different from having any other job, in terms of the time devoted to work and because of the duties and burdens associated with it. Complex family schedules also emerge as working hours are not regular and they often vary considerably according to several factors such as the needs of customers, the production times, and so on.

The days of the entrepreneurs interviewed were long and full of work commitments and they had several things in common, but women showed to have greater care for the family: for example, women were the ones more often in charge to take care of the aspects of the familiar routine, from preparing school backpacks and gym bags to accompanying the children to school.

While women took care of the family organization before leaving in the morning, men tended instead to go straight to work.

> I get up and go to work at 7 am. I go to building sites, and then meet customers, I set the work and then go back to my office around 2 pm. I am in the office until the evening, and the day has flown. I get home at night and I'm tired. I don't do anything else besides working.
>
> (Int. 4, Entrepreneur, Male firm, Work at height)

Meeting competing expectations is particularly complex and requires women to improve specific time-management skills. Women participating in this study seemed to have developed the abilities required to reconcile work and family.

> Many people tell me: «How can you make it having such little time? ». My regular day: I wake up at 6 am, organize the children and take them to school […] afterwards I go to the bank, I visit customers and suppliers. I stay at work until 7:30 pm. After that I have an hour for myself [...] This is because every night after dinner, I prepare the dinner for the next day. Everything I do, I do it by choice. I have no constraints and do it with all I can. I manage three thousand things at the same

time, I have stressful moments, but I have to be honest, I do not regret anything. Then I have to say that I get a lot of help from my husband in this. I try to provide for everyone's needs, and I try to treat myself well too, because when you're OK with yourself, you're OK with others.

<div align="right">(Int. 7, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Carpentry)</div>

During interviews, both men and women mentioned the importance of the role of their partner as a support in difficult times, especially when taking care of young children. In general, when reconciliation between family and work was more challenging, women demonstrated a tendency to involve their family in their work, relying on the collaboration of their relatives. It seems that women see their work not just as an individual project but more as a family endeavour. At the same time, women seem to be better capable of finding their own "space" for personal activities or for their hobbies. While all female respondents declared that they found time for these activities in their average day, only two male respondents reported the same.

Thus, the female entrepreneurs we interviewed seemed to be able to harmonize different but equally important moments of their life. They developed, in other words, a specific style of management that coped with problems connected to their "double presence" and did not seem to fit in the common stereotype of the incompatibility, material and symbolic, between career and family. On the contrary, the first element of their style of management was exactly their attempt to allocate their time in order to reconcile the need to spend most of the day in their company and the willingness to be active and present in the lives of their families.

To sum up the questions that led this part of the research, we can eventually state that the female leadership style creates positive results on multiple levels: not only are employees working with a female entrepreneur more satisfied, but also feminine leaders define themselves as more satisfied in comparison to their male counterparts.

2. Advice Networks and Social Capital: What Are the Differences Between Women-run and Men-run Companies?

The second question that led our research deals with the impact that different leadership styles have on the organizational net: does female entrepreneurship create different network structures from the male one?

Despite the diffusion of studies on inter and intra organizational networks, gender specificity in creating and configuring ties is still scarcely analysed (Durbin 2011). The few available studies show the personal entrepreneurs' networks or the role of networking in women managers' career (e.g. Aldrich, Reese and Dubini 1989; Ibarra, 1992; 1993; Linehan and Scullion 2008), but they don't examine the organizational network structures of which the entrepreneur is part or that he/she is responsible for. In this work we have chosen to integrate a study of the entrepreneurs' personal internal and external networks with the analysis of the configuration of organizational networks. This research also aimed to highlight the distinction between the behaviours and the perceptions of the organizational actors. There are, thus, three levels of analysis that stress the difference between:

- the perception of men and women entrepreneurs about the configuration of organizational networks;
- the configuration of organizational networks in women-run and men-run enterprises;
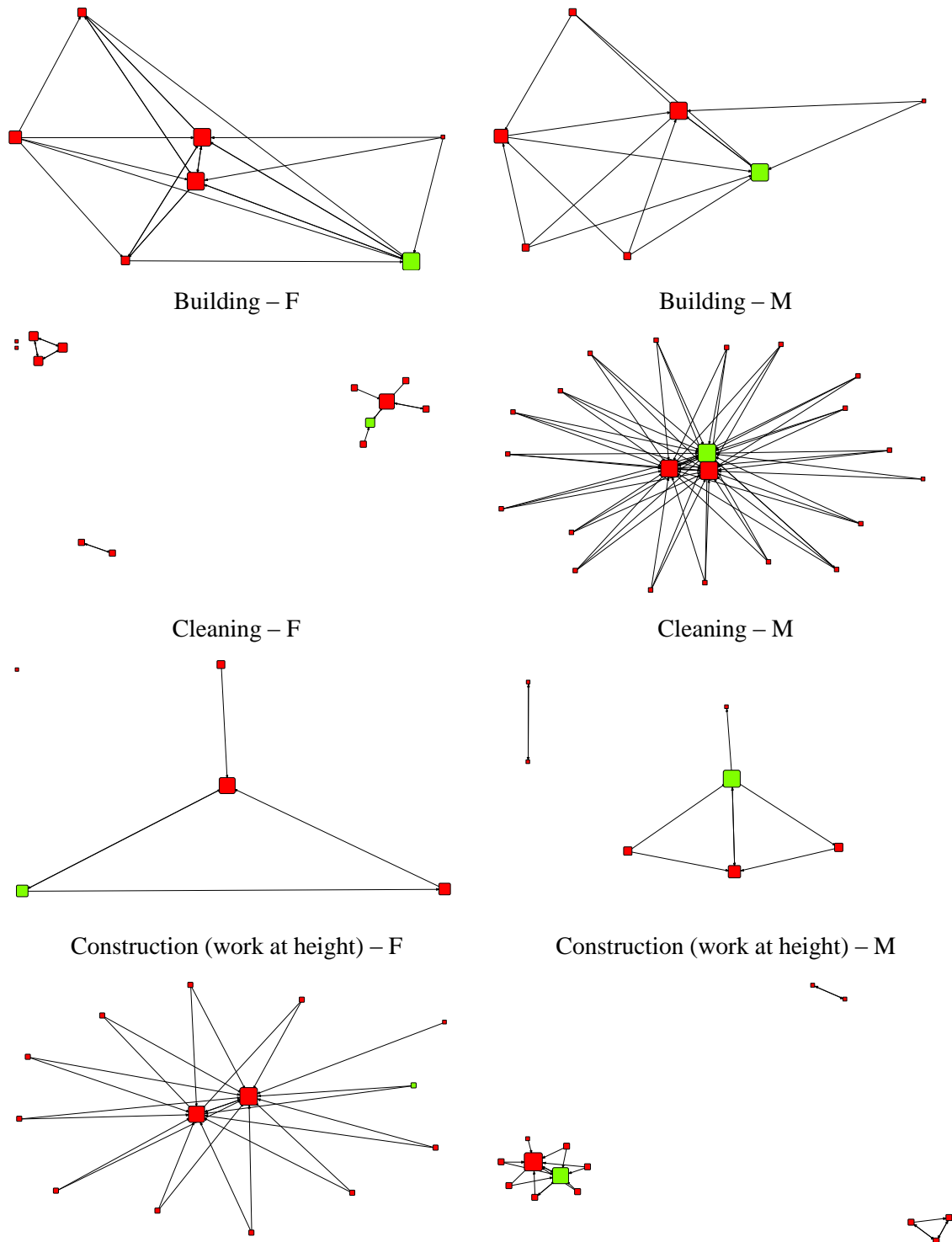- the configuration of support networks for the female/male entrepreneur.

The analysis was led using Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Wasserman and Faust 1994), a method that allows to represent and measure the qualities of the relationships that link the members of a net and the structures that they generate.
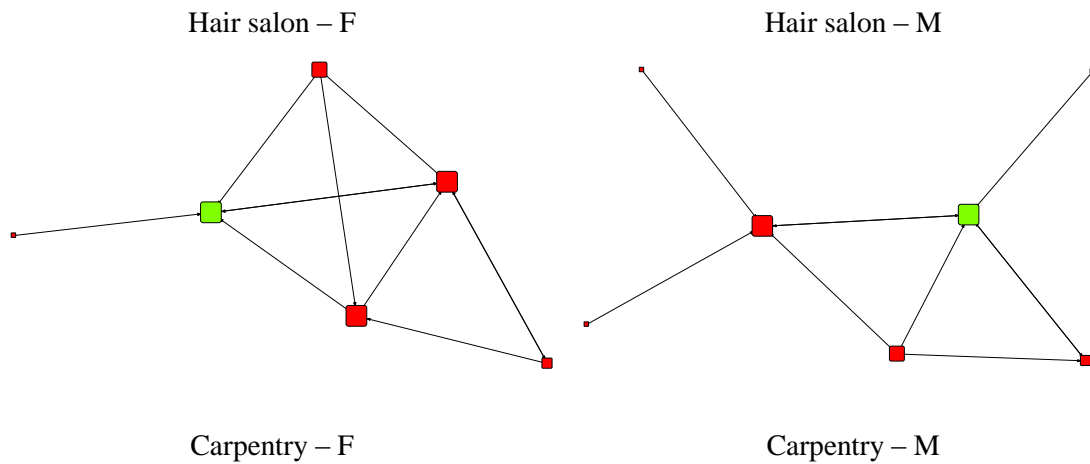
2.1. Intra-organizational Support Networks
The first case concerns the perceptions of women/men entrepreneurs when configuring advice networks inside their company (who does XY relate to when dealing with a problem with the work he/she is doing?).

Picture 1 shows the results: entrepreneurs are marked in green and the dimension of the nodes is function of the in-degree that, in this case, is the number of people who, according to the entrepreneur's perception, relate to each actor to obtain advice.

Picture 1. Intra-organizational support networks at work: entrepreneurs' perception

Building – F

Building – M

Cleaning – F

Cleaning – M

Construction (work at height) – F

Construction (work at height) – M

Hair salon – F   Hair salon – M

Carpentry – F   Carpentry – M

Source: Authors elaboration

These networks allow one to verify if entrepreneurs feel more or less at the centre of the relationships of their companies. For this purpose, three measures of centrality were calculated (Freeman 1978): the *in-degree*, i.e. the number of people who refer to a member of the organization to obtain advice in their work activities; the *out-degree,* i.e. the number of people a member of the organization refers to; the *betweenness*, i.e. a measure that calculates the tendency of people to connect different members of the organization.

Chart 3 allows one to identify the cases in which the entrepreneur puts himself/herself at the centre of the intra-organizational relationships when describing the perceived networks.

Chart 3 – Centrality of Male/Female entrepreneurs in their perceptions

Firm (F)	In-Degree	Out-Degree	Betweenness	Firm (M)	In-degree	Out-Degree	Betweenness
Building	☑			Building	☑		
Cleaning				Cleaning	☑		☑
Construction (work at height)		☑		Construction (work at height)		☑	☑
Hair salon				Hair salon			☑
Carpentry	☑			Carpentry	☑		☑

Source: Authors elaboration

Though the analysed sample is very small and doesn't permit one to make generalizations, the chart seems to show an interesting tendency. Men seem to describe them-

selves as more central in intraorganizational networks and, in particular, as important connection points that keep the organization united. Women entrepreneurs' perceptions, on the contrary, don't seem to create networks in which they assume a remarkably central role compared to the one of their employees.

A further useful note to interpret these results is the reconstruction of "effective networks" built from the statements of the interviewed people. To make this analysis, it is important to limit our observations to the two pairs of companies that made it possible to interview all the employees (Hair salon and Carpentry). Chart 4 shows the normalized values of the measure of centrality discussed in chart 3. The values marked with three asterisks indicate the cases in which the value is higher among those of the members of the organization.

Chart 4 – Measures of centrality of male and female entrepreneurs in support networks

|	Hair salon F	Hair salon M	Carpentry F	Carpentry M
In-Degree (Norm)	0.769 ***	0.615	1.000 ***	0.333
Out-Degree (Norm)	0.154	0.154	0.200	0.333 ***
Betweenness (Norm)	0.212 ***	0.029 ***	0.050 ***	0.067 ***

Source: Authors elaboration

In both cases, the female entrepreneur shows higher normalized values of centrality for *in-degree* compared both to her perceptions and to the values of the correspondent male entrepreneur.

These results are confirmed by the comparison between the net perceived by entrepreneurs, the one obtained putting together the perceptions of all the people interviewed (a link between two actors was considered as such only when at least 50% of the people interviewed had recognized it) and the actual one, meaning the one obtained considering only the declared actual behaviours of each actor. For the women-run enterprises, we note an interesting phenomenon: the female entrepreneurs perceive themselves as marginal to the advice networks, while their employees perceive them as central.

This result is particularly evident for what concerns the aesthetic salon (picture 2). In the female entrepreneur's perception, the employees refer mainly to two colleagues who she appointed as responsible for some coordination activity, while in her employees'

perceptions, and even more in the actual net, the female entrepreneur is the only point of reference of the company. The men-led company shows an opposite dynamic of behaviour: the male entrepreneur puts himself at the centre of the net of relationships, while his employees state that they have a much more spread advice network.

Picture 2 – Comparison between the perceived networks and the actual networks in two hair salons run by a woman and a man.

Hair Salon – F   Hair Salon - M

Net as perceived by Male/Female entrepreneur

Net as perceived by employees

Actual net
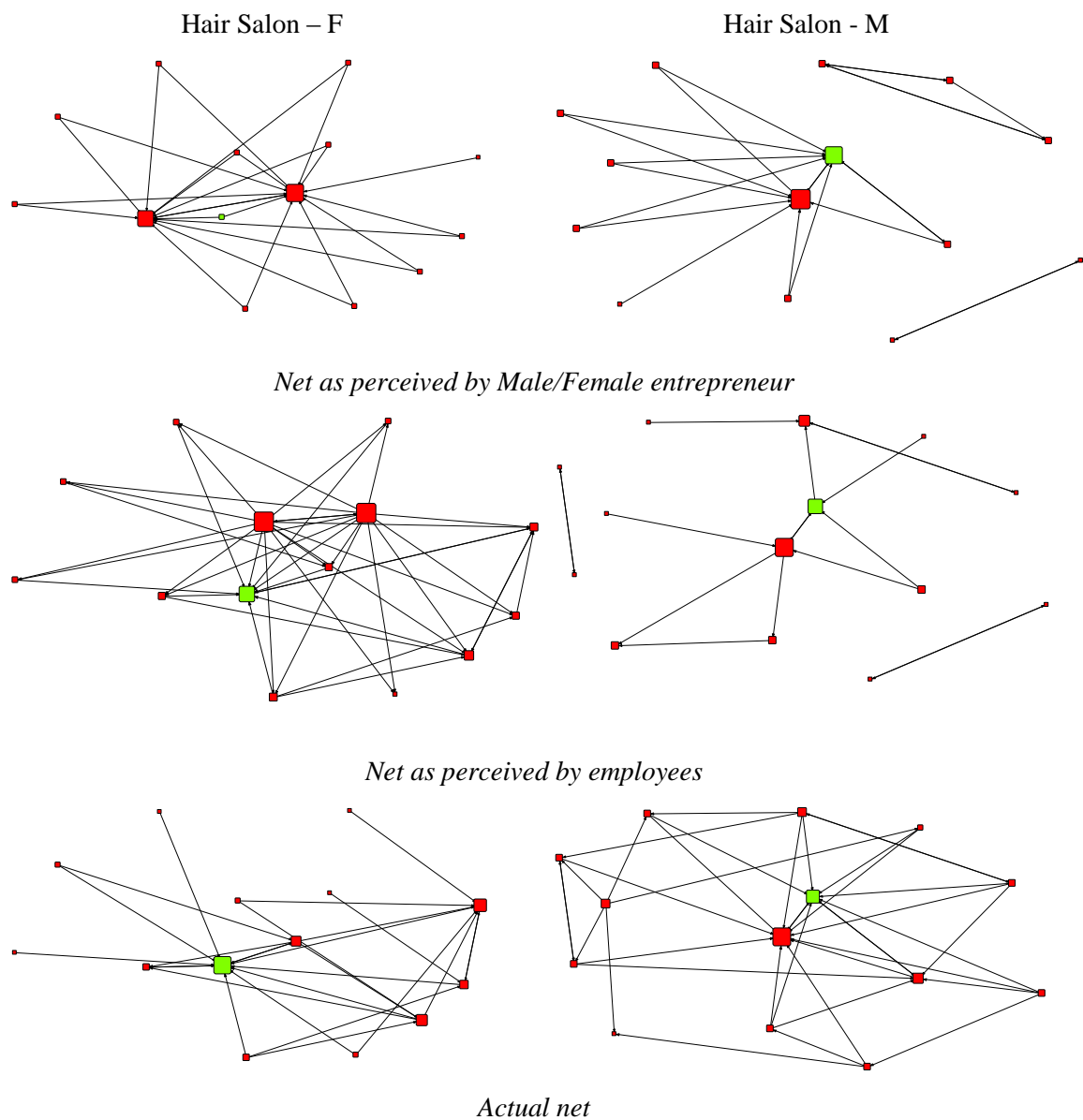
Source: Authors elaboration

2.2. Female and Male Entrepreneurs' Egonetworks

One last aspect that can be usefully analysed regards the egonetwork of female and male entrepreneurs.

Among the obstacles that women have to face in the job market, some research emphasises the exclusion from informal networks and relationships (McManus 2001). The majority of those studies, however, have focused on employees. After analysing the career pathways of more than 16,000 managers working in 4,000 American and European firms from 1997 to 2009, Lalanne and Seabright (2011) conclude that the income difference between men and women with comparable qualifications and positions depends on the networking effectiveness. The study finds a positive association between the income of men and the number of influential people they have known in their professional life. A similar association was not detected for women, with one rather significant exception: female managers' income rises increase in relationships with other influential women. This correlation is determined by many factors. The most interesting explanation is linked to the concept of *homophily*—that everyone tends to associate with similar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001).

This situation has not limited the professional potential of female entrepreneurs. Women have set up or managed firms, and so they haven't been caught in the "old-boy network" trap (Lalanne and Seabright 2011). Entrepreneurship could be seen as an opportunity to escape the bonds of subordinate jobs for working women.

Social capital, however, is a key factor even in entrepreneurial jobs. The scant existing research mentions female entrepreneurs' weak networking capabilities, and mainly connects them to the peculiarity of women's professional paths (Manolova, Carter, Manev and Gyoshev 2007).

Social capital is acquired through family and free-time activity, but above all through professional relations. Many male entrepreneurs decide to set up a firm after managerial experience as employees and can build their new companies counting on significant relationships from their previous jobs. On the contrary, women become entrepreneurs through less linear pathways and cannot capitalise based on previously established ties.

A similar pattern emerged in our interviews, with one exception—a woman who gained her early work experience in her family's firm. In this case, a sort of "relational heritage" proved to be useful at the beginning of a new activity.

> From a professional point of view, I grew up in a family-run business. I am the daughter of entrepreneurs. At the moment, my brothers manage the firm, where I worked for fifteen years. That company is in the same industry field of the company in which I work now. The market and customers are the same. I have the same faithful customers, who were my father's customers.
>
> (Int. 3, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Work at height)

In this study, personal networks beyond the family were analysed, both inside and outside the firm. Specifically, two types of relationships were examined in order to detect similarities and differences among male and female entrepreneurs: the "friendship" network ("do you talk about personal matters to any of your colleagues/employees?") and the "advice" network ("When you happen to need advice for your activity, do you have someone, inside and/or outside the firm to address?").

It is not surprising that, within their firms, all the entrepreneurs reported having more "advice" relationships than "friendship" ones. Women, however, report a larger number of colleagues whom they also consider friends. In other words, for female entrepreneurs, there is a greater relational overlap or multiplexity (Helgesen 1995) with several employees being both "advisors" and "friends" simultaneously. Men, on the other hand, seem to maintain a clearer separation between the two spheres.

If we move this analysis from the internal to the external networks of the companies, the results turn out to be completely opposite. The first result concerns the number of contacts entrepreneurs refer to when needing professional advice: male entrepreneurs report that they rely on a larger network than women do.

A surprising result, especially since the women interviewed pursue activities outside of work more frequently than men. Nevertheless, those acquaintances rarely have an impact on their professional lives. Women—who are more open to personal relationships in professional context—don't "appropriate" the social capital from their personal

lives for professional goals. Though women are used to manage the indistinct boundaries existing between their firm and their family (or maybe because they are used to this), they prefer to keep the recreational or expressive activities in a separate field. Men make an opposite choice: they don't consider their employees as friends, but they don't hesitate to discuss their work with friends and acquaintances.

In terms of gender, women's advice networks are mainly composed of men. Only one female entrepreneur mentioned having a woman among her external contacts for advice—the contact from an industry association that supports the entrepreneur in her business activity.

The people mentioned as being in the advice networks for all respondents are mainly suppliers or consultants who come from different companies and professional areas and don't know each other. This is not surprising, given the importance of permanent and fiduciary relationships with suppliers for small companies, and the fact that relationships with other entrepreneurs are less common.

> No, I don't have relationships with other entrepreneurs—only with another building contractor. For example, if my electrician is busy, I call his.
>
> (Int. 1, Entrepreneur, Female firm, Building)

In his analysis of social capital, Coleman (1990) introduces the concept of "appropriable social organisations". These are organisations created with specific goals in mind, but they also enable their members to forge relationships which are useful in other contexts—particularly professional ones.

Given the lack of networks between different entrepreneurs, external organisations could act as "relational brokers". In particular, women's associations facilitate networking among female entrepreneurs.

> We have established a women's business association. I'm a council member. I think it's useful for my future as well as for my firm's. In the Chamber of Commerce, as well, there are female representatives from all sectors. It's a way to improve my company. We've planned some events in order to raise funds and say, "There are not just men—women are active, too!"

This evidence confirms and reinforces the need for organisations specifically dedicated to create professional networks among women. Women's associations can provide useful opportunities to connect entrepreneurs who would otherwise be isolated, thus generating new synergies and new business opportunities.

3. Concluding Remarks

Having presented the major results that emerged from our field research, it is useful to go back to the questions that drove the inquiry, in order to formulate some tentative hypotheses that might be scrutinised in future studies, realized also through sampling techniques that enable a generalization of the results.

The first question of our research has highlighted the main specificities of the leadership style of entrepreneurs. While confirming the results of previous studies on this subject, our research also added a further element to the on-going academic debate. In enterprises run according to a feminine style, the level of satisfaction not only is higher among the employees, but also among the entrepreneurs.

The research pointed out two major elements related to female entrepreneurs' satisfaction. First, women entrepreneurs were able to find a good balance between work and family, reducing the difficulties connected with "double presence". Our study seems to show that to find this balance women don't necessarily need to reduce their working hours, but they manage to achieve it adjusting their schedules and working patterns in a more flexible way. An increased workload resulting from high commitment at work and with family is compensated by personal gratification at work. In this sense, sharing the burden of family duties with their husband is also a big source of help for women entrepreneurs. Moreover, contrary to their male counterparts, women manage to find some time even for leisure activities or volunteering. Findings of this research, however, can be further generalised. The women who participated in this study are not only entrepreneurs, but, more in general, workers. They are an example of how workers behave when they have the possibility to manage their time and they seem to benefit from this auton-

omy. Practices employed by these women could be extended to other forms of employment. For example, flexible working hours seem to allow reconciliation of work and family duties; some organizations might consider introducing similar arrangements for their employees, in order to facilitate women in achieving this objective.

Second, the creation of cooperative working environments also contributed positively to satisfaction. Establishing positive and engaging relationships with employees, a feminine style that emerged as typical of women entrepreneurs, directly affected their satisfaction. On their part, employees showed to appreciate the collaborative and transparent environment that characterized women-led companies because their work was acknowledged as important and they recognized themselves as part of a group, perceiving the work environment as relaxed and positive.

These positive results associated with a more feminine managerial style are not necessarily achievable only in small organizations and by women only. Managers, no matter what their gender, will indeed find it useful to employ some of the described techniques to engage and motivate employees and a similar approach might easily work in other settings as well, for example in units of larger companies.

Concerning the second question of our research, the results of the inquiry highlighted some specificities inside the net structures related to women and men leadership. Women entrepreneurs represented themselves as marginal in the organization's support net, but they emerged as points of reference in the perception and in the work of partners and employees. Men entrepreneurs, on the contrary, stated that they provided more support than what the employees perceived to be receiving from other parts of the net.

If the analysis of the organizational networks clearly showed the strengths of female leadership, the situation resulted to be opposite when examining the personal networks of male entrepreneurs. Our research appears to confirm that female entrepreneurs, like female employees, find it difficult to create professional networks to support them. In particular, while they are able to develop personal relationships in the workplace, women appear unable to use the social capital acquired outside work in their professional setting.

Furthermore, the detachment between the perceived net and the actual one points out the limits of researches exclusively based on representations given by a single actor, and

indicates as a preferential methodology the comparison between actions and points of view of all the actors involved. Where they took the shape of an intervention-research, these inquiries could be useful to promote the gradual matching of the perceptions of entrepreneurs and the experiences of employees, improving the managing action inside companies. Women's organizations could be an important tool to overcome the difficulties of female entrepreneurs in building social capital, if supported by the construction of new forms of networking that are coherent with the needs and the desires expressed by female entrepreneurs.

From these considerations a more general observation can be drawn: the boundaries between entrepreneurs, professionals and employees in the analysis of labour organization need to be reduced.

This is true in terms of research, which is still primarily focusing on employees, but also in policy design and implementation. The policies traditionally applied in a Fordist setting, designed exclusively to deal with workers and subordinate employees, are in fact proving to be rather ineffective to address the needs of today's women, who more and more frequently have flexible forms of contracts and high rates of occupational mobility. It is therefore desirable that - for example - in addition to the positive experiences of corporate welfare, initiatives at the territorial level are strengthened, to offer new services regardless of the type of employment contract.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the policy indications drawn from these experiences (flexible work schedules, participative style of leadership, strengthening of women's social capital and organizations) not only aim to strengthen women's participation in the labour market, but also to improve the quality of working life for both women and men.

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