Women Owners: Honorary Men?

This chapter focuses on the five independent female business owners who between them are the principal proprietors of four businesses. Two of the women were sisters and owned one of the businesses; the other three are single proprietors. These businesses are distributed across categories of ‘new’ and ‘old’ wealth and are in a range of economic sectors including plastics manufacturing, organic cosmetics, livery and estate ownership, combined with corporate entertainment. In contrast to the mainstream literature, the importance of Goffee and Scase (1985) and Allen and Truman’s (1991) pathbreaking work is that they begin to address the issue of women in business. However, both studies convey the sense in which female businesses are separate and distinguishable from mainstream (male) enterprise. Goffee and Scase (1985) report that women in business operate somewhat differently from their male counterparts, whilst Allen and Truman (1991) suggest that female enterprise is predominantly in the service sector. In contrast to these findings, it is argued that similarity as opposed to difference with male-headed business describes female-owned enterprise in terms of business type and managerial approach.

In examining their approach to business it is argued that these five female entrepreneurs adopt the male middle-class entrepreneurial model to successfully establish, manage and preserve the ownership and survival of their enterprise. Amongst the 70 owners the five women are unique for they seem to have ignored or overcome their gender constraints in the masculine business world. For instance, out of a total of 44 ‘new’ businesses, only two first-generation businesses, the livery and the cosmetics enterprise, have been established by women and continue to be managed and owned by them. These two women are remarkable for they have of their own volition, and against all the
odds, defied convention and entered the male world of business. The third female-owned enterprise, a ‘new’ business in plastics manufacturing, was bequeathed by the male founder to two of his daughters, who have undergone a training and socialisation typical of the male apprenticeship model. The fifth woman, in the absence of a suitable male heir, inherited a title, a large country house and land, constituting the only female owner amongst the 15 landed sector businesses in the ‘old’ wealth category. Despite the central role played by female kin, apart from one woman who had a senior managerial position in the Irish business, there are no female owners amongst the 15 ethnic minority businesses, and the five women proprietors are majority white.

Women and the entrepreneurial model

In this section it is argued that the notion of a shared business culture (Mulholland, 1997) is appropriate in the examination of women’s entry into business. In this sense it is suggested that like their male counterparts such women benefit from the material attributes of a middle-class background, which, in a rather distant but important way, helps them to cross conventional gendered class boundaries. Like men they also acquired particular kinds of knowledge and skill specific to the business they subsequently entered. In this sense, their business entry is pre-empted by their cultural capital and training. The female entrepreneurs are similar to men in a second respect: the management of business finance. Risk-alert, the women entered businesses that required little initial capital outlay, or drew on family resources, but necessitated particular kinds of expertise and access to cheap labour. However, it was personal interests combined with entrepreneurial flair that stimulated the initial business start-up in the case of the two independent women wealth creators discussed next.

Born in one of the Midland counties, Mrs B. spent her childhood in Northern Ireland. During her time there she developed an interest in horses:

‘Well, I have always been dealing with horses. It all started when I was at school and my friends at school had different horses. I used to go to Ireland on holidays and realised that every summer when I went back they had different horses. They raised them and sold them. They were all starting new ones and I thought this was fun. When I was seventeen I asked my father if I could try it and do it once with one horse. I made a lot of