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## **The Incompatability of Entrepreneurship and Femininity**

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*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.5278/freia.14136318](https://doi.org/10.5278/freia.14136318)

*Publication date:*  
1996

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Aalten, A. (1996). The Incompatability of Entrepreneurship and Femininity: A Dilemma for Women. Aalborg: Department of History, International and Social Studies, Aalborg University. FREIA's tekstserie, No. 35  
<https://doi.org/10.5278/freia.14136318>

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**The Incompatibility of Entrepreneurship and Femininity:  
A Dilemma for Women**

**FREIA**

Paper  
December 1996

**35**

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Phone: +45 98 158522

Print: Kopicentralen, Aalborg University, 1996

Layout: Inger Jensen and Ellen Nyrup Pedersen

ISSN: 0907-2179

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**Anna Aalten**

**The Incompatibility of Entrepreneurship and Femininity:  
A Dilemma for Women**

*"I consider myself a real woman, a woman who wants to stay a woman. Not a woman with pants on, trying to prove that she is a man. That is not necessary. As a woman you do not have to be better than a man. Of course you are not less than a man either. Just be yourself, that is what I always say".* These are the words of one of the female entrepreneurs I interviewed during a research project on the (in)compatibility of entrepreneurship and femininity in the Netherlands since 1945. In this quote the necessity 'to be yourself' is stressed. The theme of 'being yourself and staying a woman' came up during most of the conversations I had with women who started their own businesses in the fifties and sixties, before the second feminist wave hit the Netherlands. What did they mean by this? To what kind of femininity were they referring?

## **Women and Entrepreneurship**

Since the beginning of the eighties more and more Dutch people have decided to start their own businesses. Among them are many women. This is striking because since the war entrepreneurship in the Netherlands has been practically an all male affair. Women make up only a small percentage of all entrepreneurs. In 1947 about 10% of all entrepreneurs were female; in 1960 this went down to 8%, and in the following years increased again slightly, to 9% in 1971 and 13% in 1979. Now this is changing. According to a recent investigation (Blom 1995) one out of every six entrepreneurs is a woman and women have started 25% of all new enterprises since 1980.

These female entrepreneurs, and in fact all enterprising women, have received much attention from very different institutions. On the one hand, we see policy makers, institutions for small and medium-sized businesses, and employer's organizations who seem to have discovered women's potential for entrepreneurship and who now organize confer-

ences and training programmes to stimulate women on their way to entrepreneurship.<sup>i</sup> On the other hand, we see the Council of Emancipation initiating more research on female entrepreneurs, and within the women's movement a growth of the 'Woman and Work-movement' with 'Woman and Work-shops' where women who want to begin a business can get help and advice.

My research was not on these 'new' female entrepreneurs, the women who started their businesses under the influence of the women's movement, although they have been one of the main inspirations for my research questions. When I started the research in 1982, I came across an article in *Katijf*, a Dutch feminist magazine, in which the writers linked the growing interest in entrepreneurship among women to certain developments in the women's movement. According to the authors, trying to get a place in the labour market for oneself was the logical next step after the phase of schooling (Braams and Boelsums 1982). And what could be better than having one's own business where important feminist demands like child care and part time work are all taken care of?

I liked the idea of entrepreneurship as a feminist strategy and while I was formulating the final hypothesis for my research I kept the idea in the back of my head. But it has remained there, so people who now expect an answer to the question: 'does entrepreneurship give women power?' will be disappointed. I do not have the answer, because I have not posed the question. The main question of my research is: 'how do business-women cope with the (in)compatibility of femininity and entrepreneurship in the Netherlands?'

Recently female entrepreneurs in different regions have been the object of much research. The exceptional positions of female entrepreneurs is the starting point in all studies. In most countries female entrepreneurs are a minority when compared with male entrepreneurs. Most researchers

consider this minority position to be the main problem and try to determine its causes (Schwartz 1978; Koopman en Walvis 1986). This is why the impression is created that female entrepreneurs are a group of entrepreneurs with a special handicap: their sex. Next, the research is aimed at describing the problem and determining the difference of female entrepreneurs when compared to normal (=male) entrepreneurs (Powell and Butterfield 1986).

However, women and men are not two contrasting homogeneous groups at all places and all times. If social scientists see them this way, they have no eye for the similarities between women and men, nor for the differences among women. Furthermore, when we consider studies on female entrepreneurs there is a danger of posing the wrong problem. The female entrepreneur or female entrepreneurs as a group are not the problem, but the socio-cultural system in which they have to function (Marshall 1984). I decided to problematize the relationship between entrepreneurship and femininity. If male entrepreneurship is the standard, female entrepreneurship can be considered as a 'contradiction in terminis'. Where does this leave the women who are actually running their own businesses? In the beginning of this paper I stated that after the war entrepreneurship in the Netherlands was practically an all male affair. It is true that until the seventies women made up only a very small percentage of all the business owners, but the mere existence of between 45.000 and 55.000 enterprising women makes this a problematic remark. How did these women cope with the contradictory messages that were put to them and the different demands that are made of them?

By talking to older Dutch female entrepreneurs I wanted to gain insight into the cultural construction of femininity in the Netherlands in a specific historical period.<sup>ii</sup> I begin this paper with a short explanation of my theoretical starting points, which I have been inspired by the work of the anthropologist Gayle Rubin, the historian Joan Scott and the

philosopher Judith Butler. Then I will go into some results of my research and show the reader some shifts in the construction of femininity in the Netherlands since 1945. Next I will compare my own material with recent research on women who started their own businesses after 1975. For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on a comparison of the reasons given by the entrepreneurs for their choice of entrepreneurship.

## **Theoretical Starting Points: The Sex-Gender System**

In 1975 the anthropologist Gayle Rubin introduced the concept of the sex-gender system: 'the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied' (1975:159). Every society has its own sex-gender system, i.e. its own systematic way of transforming physiological differences between women and men into symbols of femininity and masculinity. Elsewhere I have criticized Rubin's essentialist elaboration of her own concept (Aalten 1986). Here I would like to uncover some of its basic features and go into its usefulness for the study of the construction of gender in relation to the labour market.

What is the sex-gender system? I would like to revise Rubin's definition of the concept slightly and call it: a set of arrangements by which a society transforms physiological differences between the sexes into products of human activity.<sup>iii</sup> In this definition the central assumption is that we do not know what 'women' or 'men' are, since women and men are not natural objects, but social constructions. Or, to quote Joan Scott: "we recognize that 'man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still



contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions" (1988: 49).

Next, I would like to stress the systematic character of the transformation of sex into gender. Gender must not be seen as a social variable whereby certain characteristics are assigned to certain individuals, but as an analytical category by which human beings organize their social activities. In all cultures human physiology is the raw material for a social categorization according to gender that determines ways of thinking, perceptions of the world, social institutions and daily practices. Like age, class, colour and caste, gender orders the world: it functions to allocate labour, to organize relations of production, to regulate sexuality and procreation. The importance of the sex-gender system is, however, variable; there are societies where gender is only a minor ordering principle (Ortner and Whitehead 1981).<sup>iv</sup>

There is not just one moment in history or in a person's life when sex is transformed into gender. 'Women' and 'men' are made and re-made constantly. Neither can the transformation be situated in one place. It may happen in all social, economic and political structures. For example, social definitions of femininity and masculinity may be formulated, intensified or changed, e.g. by the law or by the social division of labour. The meaning of gender, or gender symbolism, determines the division of labour by gender and individual gender identity, and makes this determination look 'natural'. In this sense, the sex-gender system is a model of reality, or, in the words of Joan Scott, a set of normative statements (1988: 43). It tells people with whom to fall in love, it gives them a limited choice of the work they can do, it permits them access to certain resources and bars them from others, and it furnishes them with a culturally appropriate image of themselves. Thus the sex-gender system sets the social and cultural boundaries within which individuals may operate.

How is this connected to my question of the (in)compatibility of femininity and entrepreneurship in the Netherlands? 'Femininity' and 'masculinity' in Dutch society are very much determined by biology. To have a woman's body in Dutch culture has severe consequences for one's ascribed characteristics, abilities and destiny. In other words, the biological sex of individuals is of great influence on one's social gender. 'Women' as a category differ from 'men' as a category because they have different bodies. In the fifties and sixties the biological aspects of the social relations between women and men were constantly stressed. People pointed at the physical difference between women and men to explain their different places in society. In 1950 a committee of the Centre for Political Education (Centrum voor Staatskundige Vorming) defended the idea of the man as the provider and the woman as the housewife by pointing at the biological function of the woman (1950:7).

In the fifties and sixties entrepreneurship in the Netherlands was a male domain. The country was rebuilding its economy after the recession of the thirties and the Second World War and for this it needed its men. Women, especially married women, were supposed to be at home, taking care of their husbands and looking after a new generation. In 1960 only 7% of married women had a paid job; in 1971 this percentage had risen slightly, to 17% (Oudijk 1983). Women were certainly not supposed to be at the head of a business. At the beginning of the seventies, 20% of Dutch people thought it unnatural for women to be in charge of men (Veerman and Verheijen 1984:58). What did this mean for the women who did become entrepreneurs? What kind of women were they? Why did they go into business? Did they experience an incompatibility between entrepreneurship and femininity? If so, how did they cope with that? Did they stretch the boundaries of femininity by including their entrepreneurship in their conception of femininity? Or were they crossing the social and cultural boundaries of femininity?

## **Female Entrepreneurs 1945-1975: Motives**

Between 1986 and 1990 I talked to thirty female entrepreneurs who started (or began to run) a business before 1975.<sup>y</sup> The vast majority of them are now over 50 years old. Fifty percent started (or began to run) their businesses when they were between the ages of 30-50; some were younger, some were older. When I talked to them, most entrepreneurs had sold their businesses, and some were in the process of doing so. There were twenty-two different kinds of businesses, including hairdressers, a bicycle chain guard factory, a physician's laboratory, hotels, a coffee roasting house, a real estate agent's office, a ladies fashion shop, travel agencies, a print shop, a driving school, a handiwork business, a dye house, an antique shop, and an import company. Four women had never married, and fourteen women were widowed or divorced when they started their businesses. Nine women are childless.

Over fifty percent of the entrepreneurs say they did not deliberately choose to become entrepreneurs. The reasons they 'ended up' as entrepreneurs vary. Two of them 'had to'; it was their only possibility for earning a living. One had just divorced her husband and had two young children who needed her care; she started a home-based import company. The husband of the other had become ill; self-employment offered her the flexibility she needed to earn a living and keep her household at the same time. The other women call their entrepreneurship an 'accident'. Some of them unexpectedly became widows. Each decided to continue their late husband's business out of a sense of obligation to him.

The majority of these women had never participated in the business and did not know the work. They were inspired by a feeling of respect for their late husband's work and a wish to pass it on to their sons. For

example, the case of the owners of the safe factory and the dye house. Both husbands had inherited the business from their fathers and when they suddenly died their wives wanted to keep it in the family. As the owner of the dye house says: *'It is a family business on the side of my late husband. It goes back to the end of the last century. The great-grandfather of my children started it. My first consideration has been to keep the company for my children. My late husband had just bought the shares of his brothers and sisters and that had not been easy. So it was from a feeling of respect that I decided to go through with it. I thought, I cannot sell it, I have to try to keep it for the children; then the tradition will stay in a straight line in the family.'* Other widows also mention a feeling of moral obligation as the main reason they kept the business going. The owners of the toy shop and the bicycle chain guard factory both grew up with the businesses. Both their fathers started the business at the beginning of this century. The toy shop was passed on to the brother and later to the husband of its present owner. They expanded it while she took care of the household and looked after the children. She called it fate when her husband suddenly died of a heart attack and she went on with the business. Family tradition was also important for the owner of the bicycle chain guard factory. Her father started the business and when he died young her mother kept it going for the elder son. When the brother decided to emigrate she took over: *'My husband never objected to it. He enjoyed this obligation. It was his feeling too that we had to keep this family company, these backgrounds, this tradition.'*

The other women who did not deliberately choose entrepreneurship call their businesses 'a grown-up hobby'.<sup>vi</sup> The owner of a physician's laboratory had worked several years before her marriage. Because she could not imagine herself as a 'mere' housewife, she started a small laboratory business at home after she got married. She wanted to combine this with her household work and the care of children. But the children did not come and the company grew, despite her intentions. The

absence of children was also a motivation for the woman who started a driving school and who is now running a handiwork business. She suffers from a serious disease, which is why she decided it would not be wise to have children. According to her, her businesses flourished 'by chance' and she made a point of telling me several times that if she had had children she would have stayed home to take care of them. She never really planned to be a business woman; her work is just something to fill her days: *'My dear girl, a business like this is not started, it goes its own way. I was the youngest in a big family. After my marriage I got bored being alone in the house all day. I did not have any other motivations. I am always full of plans. I did not start a business because of some sort of conviction. I like the company, I do it for pleasure. I do not want it to grow, because then it ceases to be a hobby.'* The owner of a hairdressing salon, who had been very fond of her work but stopped working after her marriage, began her business because she was asked by a neighbour to do her hair. She was too proud of her work to do it 'on the side', so she decided to register officially. After that her business grew 'on its own'.

But entrepreneurship is not something that just happened to them for all entrepreneurs. Several women say they deliberately chose to set up a business. Some had always wanted their own businesses; they came from families where having your own business was seen as something natural. For example, in the family of the owner of the travel agency 'everyone' started their own businesses. When she came home with her plans the whole family supplied her with money and offered her advice. The print shop was founded by the father of the woman I interviewed. She was an only child and at her birth people said: *'what a pity she is not a boy'*, to which her father answered: *'not at all, maybe this girl wants to go into business'*. Although she began to study law, after some time she decided to go into the business. Nobody was surprised; in the course of time it had become accepted that she would eventually take over. The owner of the lingerie shops was also an only child: *'My grandfather started this*

*business eighty years ago. Then my parents took over - one of my aunts, my mother's sister, was in it all her life too - and after that I was the only one in the family who could do it. I have always been attracted to business life. I started to do courses and then I came into the business.'*

But it was not so 'natural' for everybody. Some women speak of their motivation for starting a business as a feeling of being at a point in one's life where one must choose how to go on living it. Two of them had been married for years and had lived the lives of housewives. The moment their children left the house they realized they could ask for a divorce and maybe try to make an old dream become reality. One started a very chic fashion shop. The other one left her home country to study in the Netherlands and then started a little antique shop which she still enjoys daily. Both state that their realization that their children had grown up and that they had to decide then and there what to do with their lives was of vital importance.

The same feeling of 'now or never' was mentioned by other women. They were unmarried, and had been working in the same jobs for some time. They explain their motivation for choosing to begin their own businesses as a way of 'having something for myself' and of 'giving my life more meaning'. All of them started their businesses when they were between 40 and 50 years of age. At that time it had become clear that they were past the stage of marriage and starting their own families. The choice between working outside the house and looking after a family, which was a 'natural' choice for women in those days (Franssen and Van Heezik 1987), did not have to be made by them. They realized their jobs did not fulfill them; they were looking for more responsibilities and more challenges. In talking about their reasons for starting their own businesses they speak in terms of 'my life was unfulfilled' and 'I wanted to mean something to others'.

Two of the younger entrepreneurs explain the motivation for their choices as coming from an urge to prove themselves. Both had been taken from school at an early age; the feeling that they had been frustrated in their ambitions during their youth played an important role in their decisions to start their own companies. As the estate agent says: *'I come from a big family. Five brothers and two sisters. My father worked, my mother stayed at home. It was all very conservative. My father was very ambitious, he worked his way up himself. He kept talking about his sons starting their own businesses. The girls were never asked. And he always said: one of my boys must become an estate agent. Maybe that is why I had to prove I could do it.'*

## **Female Entrepreneurs after 1975: Motives**

To compare the results of my research with those regarding women who started to run their businesses in the late seventies and the early eighties, I used the studies by Van Eenbergen (1983), De Haan and Boelsums (1984), Koopman and Walvis (1986), the interview collections by De Vries (1984) and Houweling and De Wit (1985), and the quantitative study by SKIM (1986). In the SKIM research 224 female entrepreneurs were asked to state their motivations. Many women mentioned more than one. The most frequently mentioned were:

- tired of household chores (47 women)
- (the threat of) unemployment and the wish to work (43)
- always wanted my own business (40)
- it was a natural follow up to my education/earlier job (37)
- interest/hobby (36)
- wanted to be independent/to achieve something (33).

The need for something of one's own is also regularly mentioned in the small-scale studies, but arises from several sources. In some cases it is

mentioned by women who have no job outside their homes, whose household chores drive them crazy and who regard a business as a way to leave the house. They want to use their talents and their hobbies; they want to shape their creativity. In other words, to them a business is a way of expressing themselves. Other women want to have 'something for themselves' in the sense of financial independence. They want to earn their own money in a way they themselves can control.

For unemployed women, starting their own businesses often was the only way to get work: *'I have two kids and I looked for part-time jobs, but it was impossible. In the administrative sectors they prefer young women. Also many employers asked me how I was going to manage things at home'* (De Haan and Boelsums 1984:9-10). But there are also women who had well-paid jobs but set up businesses out of frustration. They feel they did not get the chances they needed and deserved and the company did not offer them possibilities for making good use of their talents and ambitions. For example, the publisher started her own business because she loathed the narrow-mindedness of other publishers (Houweling and De Wit 1985:41-51). Other women disliked working under people they considered incompetent and thus felt compelled to leave and start on their own. *'I think it is part of being independent. You don't endure doing things you don't agree with, especially if you know what you're talking about. To have good ideas and see others walk away with them. Or to see things go wrong when you know how they should have been handled... Then your only wish is that nobody owns you anymore, that you have the right to make your own mistakes...not to feel frustrated because somebody is paying you to do things you don't agree with.'*

The disliking working for a boss and the need for autonomy is sometimes linked to an ideology. This is the case with women who work in the so-called 'women's businesses', and who started their businesses with feminist motives. Rejection of the hierarchy in 'normal' business life was



their impetus for starting on their own. *'Within the women's businesses a horizontal structure is attempted, in which there is a collective structure, decisions are taken and policy is worked out collectively. Everything is on the basis of the workers' self management. This also means that the principle of competition has to be replaced by reciprocal support and solidarity. To handle power differently means to destroy traditional power-structures; it also means a reevaluation of the distinction between working with your head and working with your hands, and a levelling of income.'* (De Haan and Boelsums 1984:11-12).

However, many women in women's businesses do not work there only because of ideals; they were also hit by unemployment. More and more women want to work, while there is less paid work available. In particular, women who left the labour market some time ago and whose experience is outdated now have trouble finding jobs. Creating your own work by starting your own business can be a solution. Besides creating work, most people in women's businesses also try to give it another meaning. They demand a different organization of the work and of the circumstances in which it is done. Many women's businesses have their roots in the feminist protest against the oppressive way power is distributed in the world. By starting their own businesses these women try to create 'niches' where women can have meaningful jobs, where relations are different and where a first step has been taken to create a society according to feminist principles. As one woman put it: *'For me this company has to do with women's struggle, the improvement of my position and independence. It is closely connected to my own way of life. That is why I don't mind the poor pay, although we do strive for better wages. Independence is not only the money, but also with whom you work and for what.'* (De Vries 1984:7).

Most women in the women's businesses see entrepreneurship as a conscious strategy in their struggle against the oppression of women.

Their entrepreneurship gives them, as individuals, independence in many ways. The book of interviews by De Vries (1984) aims to stimulate women to try entrepreneurship as a strategy. The first part of the book consists of interviews with women in women's businesses; in the second part we find advice on how to go about establishing them. There the authors state: *'Now you can do the work you like, cooperate in the way you like, while everyone's contribution is important. Irregular and in appropriate working-hours are no longer out of reach. If you have children they are no longer solely your problem. In a women's business these necessary conditions are worked out by mutual consent.'* (De Vries 1984:67) Besides individual autonomy, there is also a striving for change in the existing power relations between women and men on a non-individual basis, for example by means of the creation of a women's network. In the words of one of the female entrepreneurs: *'We think that to achieve independence and for the development of one's own strength, women have to develop their own economic network and money sources.'* (De Vries 1984:34).

## **Shifts in the Construction of Femininity**

After this description of the motives female entrepreneurs have given for starting their businesses, I now want to show what insights this gives us into the constructions of femininity in the Netherlands. I will concentrate on the way female entrepreneurs make entrepreneurship and femininity compatible. Further I think that in this material it is possible to discern shifts in the constructions of femininity during the last fifty years.

The majority of older female entrepreneurs claim that their entrepreneurship is not the result of a deliberate choice. They suddenly 'found themselves in the situation', it 'grew on its own'. Many of them stress the coincidental nature of their entrepreneurship as if they at the same time

want to diminish its importance (see also Aalten 1989). For a great number of them, feelings of moral obligation and loyalty towards others (their families, their late husbands, their employees) played a vital role. They speak of their entrepreneurship as some kind of 'serving'; they only wanted to 'look after others'. The owner of the toy shop claims she went to the shop after her husband's unexpected heart attack just to help the deputy manager: *'I thought, I have to help the poor girl. Even by just sitting there, so we can cry together. I can pick up a telephone and write things down for her.'* When asked why she stayed on, she answered: *'I just sat there and stayed. It was easy. Problems did not come all together, they came one by one, so I could tackle them one by one. I just sat there and did some paperwork. I always felt I was the business minder for my late husband. When I put the day's money in the safe I felt he was looking over my shoulder. I always had that funny feeling that it was none of my business.'* These women do not mention entrepreneurship as a means of power, being one's own boss and the boss over others.

The female entrepreneurs who did deliberately choose for entrepreneurship also often denote their choice as a way of 'serving'. As the owner of the lingerie shop says: *'I decided to give my life a different direction. I wanted to go back to my profession. Not only the lingerie, not just the beauty side of it. I wanted to mean something for women.'* She talks about 'giving her life meaning' and 'to mean something to others'. Motivations like 'looking for something for myself', 'independence' and 'a way to prove myself' by way of entrepreneurship were hardly mentioned by the older female entrepreneurs. And yet those are precisely the motives many of the younger women give. Their striving for (financial) independence, reaching something in life and the development of one's own interests are often mentioned.

Does this mean Dutch women have become more independent since the fifties? With the present material I could not answer this question. What I

can do is look at the shifts that have taken place in the way women talk about themselves, and, related to this, in the way they see themselves. In other words, about one aspect of the construction of femininity in this period. The stress on the serving aspect of entrepreneurship and the careful non-mentioning of the aspects of independence and leadership correspond to the place women had as women in the fifties and sixties in the Netherlands. A book on choice of careers for girls in 1957 mentions subservience to other people as the 'natural' destination of every woman. A girl should always regard her job as a way of serving other people. Her work has to be in tune with her feminine constitution in which caring, serving and loving are central. Therefore she should choose a profession in one of the sectors where idealism and a social attitude are important. For 'serious' girls a field like pharmacy is praised because it is in agreement with *'the destination of women for a life of serving and giving love'* (Van Tricht 1957:216).

Recent research on the fifties and the early sixties also describes the strong connotation of 'subservience' and 'femininity', the forsaking of oneself and the taking care of others (Verheijen 1986). The specific 'feminine' identity of those days is laid down in the social division of labour and in Dutch law. I will mention some examples that have influenced female entrepreneurs:

- until the end of the fifties the Netherlands had a law on the legal incapacity of married women and a law on enforced expulsion of female teachers and civil servants who got married;
- it was not until 1975 that the Dutch government accepted a law on equal pay; until that time wages for women had been considerably lower than for men;
- until 1973 the Netherlands had a system of income tax under which women's personal tax allowance was lower than that of men. Also, the earnings of married women were added to those of their husbands, which put women in a higher tax category;

- if we compare the Netherlands with other European countries, the percentage of women in paid labour has been very low (20-30%); this is a consequence of the division of labour by gender which assigns wage labour to men;
- in the Netherlands we see a strong segregation in the labour market; in the seventies 60% of women worked in jobs which had mainly female employees; women also seem to have fewer choices than men: they work in fewer occupations (Siegers 1984).

Since the end of the seventies, many of the discriminating laws and regulations have been changed in favour of working women. Also the trend toward a growing number of married women working outside their homes, which started in the late sixties, has continued. Certain cultural shifts, like growing individualisation and increasing recognition of the right of self development, are also discernable in the conceptualisation of femininity (Grunell 1984). According to Knijn there has been a shift in the content of motherhood: from the self-forsaking motherhood of the sixties to the self-developing motherhood of the eighties (1985).

The shift in the expectations women have of entrepreneurship is comparable to this. Women who started (or began to run) their businesses in the fifties and sixties denote their decision as a means of subservience, while women who started after 1975 describe entrepreneurship as a means of self-realization and (financial) independence.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by going back to the central theoretical notion of my research: my use of the sex-gender system. Gayle Rubin gives a structuralist elaboration of the concept; her sex-gender system is a discourse that determines people's actions. But individual women and men are not simply the passive products of a structural determination. Their own actions help to create and re-create gender constructions. Therefore, I would prefer a more Geertzian view in which the sex-gender system is seen as a historically specific and constantly changing system by which individual people shape their lives (Geertz 1973). It involves both discourses and practices, being at the same time a model of and a model for reality.

While the sex-gender system renders meaning to the relations between women and men, we cannot assume that this meaning is permanent and uncontested. Precisely because the sex-gender system involves both discourses and practices, it is subject to change. One of the ways in which the sex-gender system is changed is precisely by the practices of the businesswomen I met during my research. These women show us that 'being a woman' must be seen as "a subtle and strategic project, labourious and for the most part covert" (Butler 1987: 131). The dilemma of female entrepreneurs is that they must prove they can do a man's job, while they at the same time have to prove that, despite of this capacity, they did not loose their femininity.

This is what is meant by the businesswoman I quoted at the beginning of this paper. She talks about 'being a woman', including her entrepreneurship in her definition of femininity. By redefining femininity so that it includes her own situation she makes it clear that gender is never a stable category, ultimately based on physiological differences between women and men. Instead, gender must be seen as a performative act

(Butler 1990: 279), a 'doing' by which individual people place themselves in a cultural system that transforms these differences into products of human activity. Female entrepreneurs are 'taking on a gender' when they incorporate the normative statements on being a woman in their ways of talking about their entrepreneurship. Female entrepreneurs choose to enter a male domain. They make it quite clear that human beings cannot be seen as the passive products of structural and cultural determination. Does this mean that they have broken the social and cultural boundaries of femininity?

We have seen how older female entrepreneurs who started their own businesses denoted this step in terms of subservience and responsibility for others. Choosing entrepreneurship as a means of becoming financially independent, being self supporting and taking one's life in one's own hands was not mentioned. On the basis of my material I suggest that older female entrepreneurs, although they have broken through the division of labour by gender, feel the need to present themselves explicitly as 'women'. Also Dutch law and Dutch income taxation still treat them as 'women'. Furthermore we can observe from their motives for entrepreneurship that they see subservience as a central aspect of femininity. By denoting the choice of entrepreneurship as a way of serving other people's needs, older female entrepreneurs make entrepreneurship compatible with femininity (Aalten 1989; Aalten 1991). They do not break the social and cultural boundaries, but they do stretch them to some extent. They may not question the centrality of serving others in the definition of femininity, but at least they have stretched the cultural meaning of entrepreneurship to make room for their ways of running a business.

Women who started their businesses recently stress the importance of (financial) independence and self-realisation as motivations for entrepreneurship. Many of them seem to regard entrepreneurship as an individual

or collective strategy for combatting gender disadvantage. They not only enter the male domain of entrepreneurship, but also want to occupy part of it. This often leaves them with a heavy load to carry. Or, as Benard and Schlaffer put it in their book on German career women: *'Warum drängt sich uns bei der Durchsicht dieser Anleitungsbücher das Bild anatolischer Bauerinnen auf, die den Acker pflügen, Babies schleppen, Brennholz tragen, Lasten transportieren, während ihre Männer Tee trinkend und rauchend im Schatten sitzen? Und über Politik reden? Nur müssen die neuen Anatolinnen auch noch über Politik informiert sein, das ist der Unterschied.'* (1981:197). But by entering the male domain of entrepreneurship with the explicit wish of conquering a fair share of it, female entrepreneurs nowadays consciously challenge the division of labour by gender. In doing so they make entrepreneurship and femininity compatible by transforming the meanings of femininity.

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- i. The attention to female entrepreneurship goes hand in hand with a growing interest in entrepreneurship in general. Social and economic developments, including high unemployment, automatization, and the expansion of the service sector, have made entrepreneurship more attractive both politically and for individual members of society.
- ii. The reasons for choosing this period are twofold. In the first place, I wanted to exclude women whose decision to become an entrepreneur was influenced by the women's movement as a movement. In the second place, I wanted to talk to women who had had lifelong experience in entrepreneurship.
- iii. Rubin gives several definitions of the sex-gender system. In all of them she sees the regulation of sexual needs as the main feature; this is the goal to which the social construction of gender is dedicated. For Rubin, female and male sexuality (whatever they may be) become the basis for gender differentiation and so, unwittingly, she falls into the trap of essentialism (see Aalten 1986).
- iv. Emphasis on the biological factor also varies within different cultures. In some cultures the differences between women and men are completely derived from (supposed) biological differences, while in others biology is seen as unimportant (Ortner and Whitehead 1981).
- v. It is impossible to select a representative sample of female entrepreneurs, since women are not registered as women with the Chamber of Commerce. I selected the entrepreneurs for my research by making enquiries in my family, among acquaintances and via the Dutch branch of the International Union of Female Entrepreneurs. The majority of the entrepreneurs I talked to were or had been a member of this organization. This overrepresentation of (old) Union members is a possible source of bias.
- vi. I want to stress here that all women included were or had been at the head

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of a substantial business. Even the women who had initially started something small eventually had businesses that could support them quite well.

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