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# The Female Entrepreneur's Point of View and the Italian Economy

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During the period from 1950 to 2000, gender-based entrepreneurial associations (above all, AIDDA) have provided a decisive contribution to a new women's entrepreneurial identity in Italy that extends beyond gender stereotypes connected with the family. The gender-based professional networks influenced the traditional social representation of entrepreneurship as an activity generally characterized by features identified with the male gender. Moreover, during the 1980s, media portrayals of a new generation of women entrepreneurs were important. In fact, in harmony with the new Italy of the "personalization of leadership" and of "political show"—as happened in other countries of that same period—they proposed new models of female professional success. The present portrayal of Italian men and women entrepreneurs tends to be oppositional, in part because women entrepreneurs' organizations are behaving increasingly as political players.

A widespread perception and self-representation of women (abroad as well as in Italy) emphasizes their lesser aptitude for innovation and their tendency to believe less in their own abilities than do their male colleagues.[1] As Candida G. Brush and her colleagues observe, "women's self-expression contributes to their lack of credibility in growing a business."[2] Indeed,

[1] In a survey covering thirty-nine countries carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2000 and 2003, young women were found to have a lesser aptitude for innovation, a lesser spirit of enterprise, and less self-confidence compared to their male peers. In the area of problem solving, however, the young women equaled their young male colleagues. Since interviews were the source of these data, the young women's lower aptitude for innovation and lower degree of self-confidence were to a considerable extent the result of their self-perceptions and aspirations.

[2] In the United States the majority women-owned firms made up 30% of all businesses. In 2003, 28% of the firms had women as the majority shareholders; "if women with 50% ownership shares are counted, the total climbs to 46% of all

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women tend to use a language and a style of communication that make them appear less assertive than men. They are more realistic about the difficulties and the unknown factors of the market and they downplay their certainties while men minimize their doubts.

As Pierre Bourdieu explains, in the social world "*le recit de vie*" tends to be as close as possible to the official model of presentation of the self, and it varies according to the social quality of the role that is offered.[3] Yet a quick glance around the world shows us that, in many regions, the number of women heading enterprises has more than doubled from the 1990s until today. In Canada, for example, women control half of the smaller-sized firms. In the United States, from 1997 to 2002, women owners of larger-sized enterprises (those with over one hundred employees) increased by 18.3 percent. In 2004, women were in positions of command in 48 percent of all private U.S. firms (holding at least 50 percent of the controlling stock) and one of eighteen was an entrepreneur.[4]

In Italy, the situation is certainly different from that in the United States.[5] From 1992 to 2005, the number of enterprises owned by women increased by 37.95 percent. Women controlled or owned about 24 percent of the total number of companies, and they were 25.48 percent of the total number of owners.[6] Yet, in 2005, the real novelty of women's entrepreneurship in Italy was and is that, as in the most advanced countries, women have increasingly begun to invest in male sectors such as construction, transport, communications, public utilities, and services to agriculture and industry.

The data in Table 1 show a changing reality at variance with the image of women outlined in the OECD survey as having little self-confidence and a lesser spirit of enterprise than men have.[7] Furthermore, when we consider that in Italy the rate of "feminization" of enterprise is greater in regions with

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privately owned business." Candida Brush, et al., *Clearing the Hurdles: Women Building High-Growth Business* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2004), 70.

[3] Pierre Bourdieu, "L'Illusion Biographique," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 62-63 (June 1986): 69-72.

[4] Candida Brush et al., "Women Entrepreneurship in the United States," in *Growth-Oriented Women Entrepreneurs and Their Businesses: A Global Research Perspective*, ed. Candida Brush et al. (Northampton, Mass., 2006), 185.

[5] As far as women's work is concerned, Italy is also behind with respect to many partners in the European Union. Women make up 51.44% of the population, and 45.8% of working-age women are employed; men make up 48.5% of the population and 69.9% are employed (*Istat 2006-Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* [National Institute of Statistics].

[6] There were 877,068 women (+38.1%) among 3,442,392 owners. There was also an increase of 33.97% in women partners with 786,660 women (65.39% of the total number of partners); see Infocamere Data 1992 and 2005 (Infocamere is the Information Network of the Italian Chambers of Commerce).

[7] The OECD survey is quoted and analyzed in *Il Sole 24 ore*, 24 Feb. 2007.

TABLE 1
% Rate Increase in Number of Main Sector Female Enterprises between 2003 and 2005

| **Sector** | **Rate Increase %** |
|---|---|
| Economic activities overall | 3.7 |
| Health services | 16.3 |
| Transport and communications | 17.6 |
| Public utilities | 15.8 |
| Finance services | 5.5 |

Source: *Infocamere* (Italian Chambers of Commerce Information Network).

TABLE 2
The System of Enterprise in Italy (Industry and Services), 2004
(size in terms of number of employees)

| Size of Enterprise | % of Total No. of Enterprises | % of Employees | % Value Added | % Self-Employed (M and F) | % Self-Employed (F 2003) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small (<10 employees) | 94.9 | 47.8 | 31.6 | 65.7 | 74.0 |
| Large (>250 employees) | 0.07 | 18.3 | 29.2 | | |
| Medium | 5.03 | 33.9 | 60.8 | | |
| Totals (N=4,200,000) | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.0 | | |

Sources: Our elaboration on data from *Istat-Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* [National Institute of Statistics] and *Infocamere*.

lower levels of female employment, such as the south of Italy. Nevertheless, despite this progress, as I show in Table 2, most women-run firms have difficulty implementing their development strategies and remain small.

Many factors may explain these contradictions and changes, including cultural, social, economic, technological, and political. In this paper, I examine the function of women's entrepreneurship networks and the role they play in changing the social perception of the role of women in the business world, and I compare those with self-representation of male entrepreneurship. I focus on AIDDA, the *Associazione imprenditrici e donne dirigenti d'azienda* [Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Women Directors of Industry], which is one of the most important Italian women's professional associations. Indeed, AIDDA has proposed a new culture of

TABLE 3
Rate of "Feminization" of Economic Activity in Italy, 2003

| Region | % Female Firms | % Male (not Female) Firms |
|---|---|---|
| Northwest | 21.9 | 78.1 |
| Northeast | 20.7 | 79.3 |
| Central | 24.7 | 75.3 |
| South | 26.5 | 73.5 |
| Islands | 24.6 | 75.4 |
| Average | 23.5 | 76.5 |

Source: *Infocamere*.

enterprise and a new role for entrepreneurs that are in many ways antagonistic to those generally associated with business. In the twenty-first century AIDDA acts as a political player in the Italian scene and aims to insert women at the top of the country's political institutions.

The agenda of another women's (although not trade) network, the *Fondazione Marisa Bellisario*, confirms the importance of these choices. The network, created in Rome in 1989 and named after the well-known Italian telecommunication sector manager, has as its main task promoting and enhancing the professionalism of women in both public and private economic sectors. In the past, *Fondazione* supporters theorized about the utility of creating lobbies to support women's careers. More recently, they highlight the importance of ethics and transparency as benefits of female entrepreneurship.[8]

## The Theoretical Frame and the Sources

### *The Theoretical Frame*

In this paper, I place the social and cultural dimension of economic action in a historical perspective, considering gender differences above all. In order to analyze the main issues, I examine the conceptual references and theoretical models that allow us to include gender (Wendy Gamber, Angel Kwolek-Folland, Kathy Peiss, Joan W. Scott) in the analysis of entrepreneurship and family business (Roy Church, Geoffrey Jones, Mary B. Rose, Mark Casson,

[8] That is the result of a study carried out by *Censis Servizi-Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali Servizi* on behalf of Fondazione Bellisario, published as Fondazione Marisa Bellisario, *Donne nella comunicazione valore e trasparenza: Le protagoniste 2007* [Women in the Communication Sector Value and Transparency: The Protagonists 2007] (Rome, 2007).

Philip Scranton).[9] Instead, the concepts of representation and self-representation are employed, following the theoretical formulations of economists, psychologists, sociologists, theorists of the cognitive approach to the economy (Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky), and gender-based business studies (Candida G. Brush).[10]

Indeed, scholars taking a cognitive approach to economic phenomena, among whom Hayek was a pioneer, have highlighted the strict relationship between economic images and behavior.[11] Hayek wondered in particular about the process of acquisition and elaboration of information. In his analysis, subjectivity permeates perception, and the relationship between subject and object is dynamic: "the environment is an elastic concept," which expands and contracts according to its representation in the mind.

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[9] See Wendy Gamber, "A Gendered Enterprise," *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 188-217; Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (New York, 1988), 28-52; Joan W. Scott, "Conceptualizing Gender in American Business History," *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 242-49; Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York, 1998); Angel Kwolek-Folland, "Gender and Business History," *Enterprise & Society* 2 (March 2001): 1-10; Candida G. Brush, "Research on Women Business Owners: Past Trends, a New Perspective and Future Directions," *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* 16 (summer, 1992): 5-30; Kathy Peiss, "Vital Industry and Women's Ventures: Conceptualizing Gender in Twentieth-Century Business History," *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 219-41.

The "family business" has not yet been satisfactorily defined by scholars. Some researchers privilege aspects of ownership, others the control of shares and management, still others continuity over generations. Attention has shifted to the existing relations in various countries between national cultures and the organization of the economy; see Andrea Colli, *Capitalismo famigliare* [Family Business] (Bologna, 2006), about the difficulty of defining a family business. In this paper, I adopt Mark Casson's definition focusing on the control of family business; see Mark Casson, *Entrepreneurship and Business Culture* ( Studies in the Economics of Trust, vol. 1) (Aldershot, 1995); Mark Casson, "The Economics of the Family Firm," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 47 (Winter 1999): 10-23; Geoffrey Jones and Mary B. Rose," Family Capitalism," in *Family Capitalism*, ed. Geoffrey Jones and Mary B. Rose (London, 1993), 1-14; Roy Church, "The Family Firm in Industrial Capitalism: International Perspectives on Hypotheses and History," *Business History* 35 (Oct. 1993): 17-43; Philip Scranton, "Build a Firm, Start Another: The Bromleys and Family Firm Entrepreneurship in the Philadelphia Region," *Business History* 35 (Oct. 1993): 115-51; Philip Scranton, "Small Business, Family Firms, and Batch Production: Three Axes for Development in American Business History," *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 99-106.

[10] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky Kahneman, eds., *Choices, Values, and Frames* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000); Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty* (Cambridge, U.K., 1982).

[11] Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology* (1952; Chicago, 1976).

Recent theoretical formulations have demonstrated that entrepreneurs are not motivated only by economic goals; systems of values and cultural elements contribute to forging the entrepreneurial image and, therefore, entrepreneurial decisions.[12] Here I take into account how Mark Casson's theory of the entrepreneur overcomes the segmentation of the entrepreneurial role (between manager and entrepreneur) suggested in the traditional business literature. The "ethical man" theorized by Casson is an entrepreneur who makes judgments and decisions because he is moved by a personal system of values and ideas, not only by the quest for profit. Generally, this system is rooted in values of trust (honesty, hard work, loyalty, and so forth) in order both to reduce transaction costs and to strengthen the dynastic motive in family firms. In addition, community and religion, professional allegiance, and, it has been suggested, political affiliation may promote trust.

In fact, economic action cannot be explained only by referring to individuals and their motivations as atomized actors, as Ronald S. Burt, Mark Granovetter, and Richard Swedberg suggest, but must be seen as rooted in a system of personal relations and interpreted in social context.[13] Indeed, entrepreneurs are actors who are able to choose their motivations from inside the social group in which they move.

*The Sources*

In order to understand whether differences exist inside the system of values and outlooks that move entrepreneurs, the sources cannot be examined in a traditional and systematic way, but must be viewed utilizing a cognitive approach to produce "the official model of presentation of the self" of women and men in the business world and to highlight their mindsets.[14]

I base this paper on printed materials, the archives of associations and agencies available on the Internet, and on oral interviews. The historical archives include those of the most important Italian women's entrepreneurial association, *Archivi Aidda e Apid-Imprenditorialità donna* [Association of Small Enterprises Run and Owned by Women], and the archives of the "*Cavalieri del Lavoro*" [Knights of Labour], which is the most important official award for entrepreneurs in Italy. Other sources include articles from the most reliable economic and daily press in Italy, such as *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Corriere della Sera*, and approximately 350 oral interviews.

Besides these qualitative sources, I have also consulted quantitative sources, including statistics from many national series collected by *Istat* (the

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[12] Kenneth Lipartito, "Culture and the Practice of Business History," *Business and Economic History* 24 (Winter 1995): 1-41.

[13] See Mark Granovetter, "The Economic Sociology of Firms and Entrepreneurs," in *Entrepreneurship: The Social Science View*, ed. Richard Swedberg (Oxford, U.K., 2000), 244-69; Richard Swedberg, "The Social Science View of Entrepreneurship: Introduction and Practical Applications," in *Entrepreneurship*, 7-39; and Ronald S. Burt, "The Network Entrepreneur,"in *Entrepreneurship*, 281-307.

[14] Bourdieu, "L'Illusion Biographique"; Hayek, "The Sensory Order."

official Italian institute of national statistics) and by the *Unione delle Camere di Commercio Italiane* [Italian Chambers of Commerce Network]. In this way, I have built a prosopographic study of about 1,500 Italian female and male entrepreneurs representing all the productive sectors.

## Italian Female Entrepreneurs: Between Being and Appearing

The social representation of women engaged in the business world according to female archetypes and commonly accepted "ideal types" for many years has relegated women's entrepreneurship to the sphere of the family, considered as much an economic unit as a symbolic universe.

The symbolic function and importance of the family for societal organizations and in the values of the Roman Catholic tradition are important factors in Italian culture. Indeed, the centrality of the family as an element of social continuity and of enterprise, as well as a real and ideal axis of economic unity, is an enduring cultural component of Italian capitalism.

The testimonies of women entrepreneurs concerning their lives show that in Italy women's roles determined the development of family capitalism and the diffusion of systems of small enterprise, even though the multiplicity of tasks and functions they performed were carried out informally in company activities and were often recognized only by default by the men in the family.[15] Thus, for a long time women have acted as protagonists of informal economic activities in the division and assignment of responsibility, and in the mechanisms of financing and self-financing of companies. These economic elements have been invisible, and so have not been included in statistical calculations concerning the creation and the functioning of the family business.

Ample support for this hypothesis comes from the many individual stories of woman entrepreneurs in the latter half of the twentieth century.[16] Operating well beyond the gender stereotypes of women engaged in some productive "niches" (such as clothing) and in services (such as commerce and health), in reality women entrepreneurs possess knowledge and specializations strongly connected to the local culture of production, disproving many assumptions concerning gender competencies. This activity

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[15] The representation of women in command of family firms as entrepreneurs "by default" by the men of the family conforms to commonly acknowledged female gender roles in Western culture. See recent statements by Beatrice Craig, "The Family Firm in History and Historiography," and Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Economic Household: A Case Study of Women's Fiscal Activity in the 19th-Century United States," papers presented at the International Economic History Conference, Helsinki, August 21-25, 2006.

[16] I point this out in the 350 interviews carried out by researchers in a project on women's entrepreneurship I coordinated from 1999 to 2003; see Adriana Castagnoli, ed., *L'imprenditoria femminile in Italia: Il caso emblematico del Piemonte, 1945-2000* [Women's Entrepreneurship in Italy: The Emblematic Case of the Piedmont] (Milan, 2007).

is demonstrated both by the stories of women reaching the top of engineering and chemical family firms and companies in northwest Italy, and by the recent high rate of "feminization" of various sectors of economic activity in south and central Italy (such as agriculture, shipping, tourism, and so forth), where women have revealed a lively capacity for entrepreneurial initiative compared to their Italian male peers.

In this regard Anna Maria Artoni, past president of the *Giovani imprenditori italiani* [Young Italian Entrepreneurs] and an active businesswoman in transport services, recalled: "looking around me at home, I saw my mother, who has always had an important role in the family and in the company, and I realised that I had never considered her to be an exception, an anomaly."[17] Emma Marcegaglia, vice-president of *Confindustria* and an entrepreneur in the steel and engineering industry, stated in talking about her family: "my mother Mira: above all she is a very good mother but she also is a very good entrepreneur, always and still present working alongside me, my father and my brother."[18] Nevertheless, the social image and representation of these well-known business families had centered on male figures prior to the emergence of the youngest female generation. In Italy the representation of women entrepreneurs as independent women able to take control of positions of prestige in company roles traditionally assigned to male figures is a recent phenomenon. In part, this constitutes an acknowledgement of the process of female emancipation peculiar to the twentieth century, which has led an army of women to enter the work force in the last fifty years. In other ways, the image of women in command is also part of general changes that have taken place in the representation and social perception of entrepreneurship, the invisibility of women's entrepreneurial aptitude, and the apparently indissoluble roles of family enterprise.

After the Second World War the increasing rate of "feminization" of higher education and universities, the consumption revolution that transformed both women's self-perception and the perception of their relationship to the "domestic," as well as their access to the professions and to work, comprised a similar array of factors that transformed women's lives.[19]

Certainly, women have come a long way since the 1865 introduction of laws concerning the husband's authority with the *Codice Pisanelli*, which for many decades discouraged wives from self-employment both in *mercatura* [trade] and in other *negozio* [business]. Women's full legal capacity and their right to participate in the professions were recognized only in 1919.

The enactment of further substantial changes in family law came only after the fall of fascism and the return of democracy. Until the early 1960s, the doctrine of the Church not only sanctioned the view that women in the

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[17] Storie: Anna Maria Artoni; viewed 10 Jan. 2007. URL: http://www.ermesimprese.it/wcm/imprenditoriafemminile/index.htm.

[18] Emma Marcegaglia, Master Honoris Causa in Gestione Integrata d'Impresa; viewed 5 May 2007. URL: http: //www.cuoa.it/.

private sphere were subject to the authority of their husbands, but also exhorted women not to follow "misleading" paths of emancipation. Thanks to rapid changes in the economic and social environment, the Second Vatican Council reconsidered family roles, in principle recognizing reciprocity between husband and wife and upholding the need for the "promotion" of women.[20]

In the world of work, where until 1962 the law permitted the firing of married women, substantial equality was obtained only by the April 10, 1991, law 125, "*Azioni positive per la realizzazione della parità uomo-donna nel lavoro*" [Affirmative Action for the Achievement of Equality between Men and Women at Work].

The break with the past regarding the representation of women entrepreneurs according to stereotypes relegating their entrepreneurial actions to the family sphere took place in the 1970s and 1980s, when important changes occurred, not only in economic standards, but also in Italian custom, society, and politics. During those decades, the Italian national Commission for the realization of equality between men and women (created by decree on June 12, 1984) put into effect the first "affirmative action" movement with the campaign "*Vota donna*" ["Vote women"] on the occasion of the May 1985 regional elections.[21] The professional gender networks also contributed to altering the traditional social representation of the entrepreneurial profession as an activity commonly considered to be defined by male gender characteristics.

## AIDDA

From the 1930s, the *FIDAPA*, *Federazione italiana donne arti professioni affari* [Italian Federation of Women in Arts, Professions, and Business] had counted among its members women representatives from among some of the best-known entrepreneurial families (exemplified by its president, Sofia Garzanti, of a well-known family of publishers), particularly those from Lombardy. Nevertheless, the first entrepreneurial association of women was the *Associazione imprenditrici e donne dirigenti d'azienda*, founded in 1961 in Turin.

AIDDA was born as an affiliate of the *Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales* (FCEM), an international network founded on the initiative of a woman entrepreneur of the iron and steel industry, Yvonne Foinant.[22] In 1946, she had created the *Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises* in France, with the ambitious aim of ensuring institutional representation for women

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[20] Mariuccia Salvati, "Studi sul lavoro delle donne" [Studies on Female Work], in *Alla ricerca del lavoro* [Looking for the Job], ed. Angelo Varni (Turin, 1998), 126-27.

[21] Marisa Bellisario was one of its members.

[22] I have used various sources to reconstruct the history of AIDDA given here, from commemorative booklets and publications by AIDDA, to the documentary material deposited at the *Aidda Archivio di Torino*, to the information and interviews published in journals and daily newspapers.

entrepreneurs, company directors, and senior managers. "The aim of our association," declared one of the women founders, "is only one: to highlight the contribution of women in top management, to build organization that is able to overcome prejudices about the achievements of women in the field of work."[23]

It was not only women entrepreneurs who took steps toward the creation of a women's entrepreneurial association, however; in an informal way, some leading male figures who were "insiders" in industry and the mass media were involved in the project. They understood how deeply rooted were the prejudices that might obstruct such an association from the moment of its conception. Only later were contacts made with other women directors and entrepreneurs presumed to be willing to provide support for the creation of the association.

In Turin, the most important power center was Fiat. The president of that great automobile company, Vittorio Valletta, on several occasions expressed his approval of the "success of women in the sphere of work" in important positions.[24] Nevertheless, the women in charge of Valletta's secretariat preferred not to join the AIDDA, thinking that in their refusal they were respecting the regulations and codes of behavior followed by the majority of Fiat's management.[25]

The first president of the association was an American, Marian Taylor, who after her studies at the Sorbonne and her marriage to the philosopher Nicola Abbagnano moved to Turin and set up a small publishing company.[26] She was steeped in the American culture of associations (among other roles, she had held an important position in Soroptimist, an international volunteer organization for business and professional women), and held an emancipated and modern view of women. Taylor tried also to work for a renewal of the international network of the FCEM, with the support of other European delegations such as the English, German, and Dutch.[27]

AIDDA was in many ways the interpreter and anticipator of the new pro-female activism. Indeed, the international network of women entrepreneurs was a formidable training ground for its members, who tackled in the 1960s avant-garde questions that continue to be relevant into the twenty-first century.[28]

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[23] *Aidda Archivio* [*Aidda* Archive] [hereafter, AA], Elisabetta Tamagnone, *Perché . . . quando . . . come . . . è nata la nostra* Aidda [Why . . . When . . . How . . . Our *Aidda* was Born], typed MS (Turin, 1 April 1974), 2-4.

[24] Ibid., 3-4.

[25] Ibid.; AA, *Verbale Aidda* [*Aidda*'s Minutes], 18 April 1962.

[26] Taylor had met the philosopher Abbagnano in Paris. After the war, she founded a small publishing company that published books on philosophy, sociology, and psychology, including works by her husband.

[27] AA, *Verbale del Consiglio* [Council's Minutes], 16 Feb. 1963.

[28] AA, *Verbale del Consiglio*, 31 Jan. 1962, quaderno n.0. Asa, *Verbale del Consiglio*, 31 Jan. 1962. In addition to expressing their opinions on various subjects, they were able to evaluate the bureaucratic rigidity of the Italian administration—for example,

During the 1970s, AIDDA took an important step forward. The association established new objectives in addition to the traditional goals of female emancipation and recognition of women's rights. The members proposed strengthening entrepreneurial education and culture among women and placing the association at the top of the *Confindustria* (the national association of Italian entrepreneurs) aristocracy. To make the activities of AIDDA more widely known, the organization presented and publicized its initiatives through the mass media, making full use of new marketing and communication techniques.

The association fully developed professional themes relating to entrepreneurial culture in the 1980s. At that time, they took on and discussed such fundamental questions as female management, business communication, European Community financing for industry, and technological innovation.[29] At the end of the decade, in concert with the reform of European Community funds, the European network Iris, headquartered in Brussels, received AIDDA. The Centre of Research on European Women coordinated this network for training, which they sought to achieve through international exchange.[30]

The international goals of AIDDA were to find full expression during the 1990s. In a meeting held in April 1996 in Paris, the OECD had placed the discussion of themes of great social and economic importance on the agenda. These included new and old poverty, which globally affects women above all; the creation of new jobs; and development of countries still struggling with social difficulties and forms of economic backwardness. Various women's associations devoted special attention to analyzing the causes behind the origin of the crisis brought on by the slowdown of the international economy. At a session organized in Venice, Etta Carignani, the president of AIDDA, pointed out the need to re-launch the political action of women's associations, as the difficult economic situation was common to many countries. Indeed, in her opinion, to overcome the impasse it was necessary both to exploit the great potential and opportunities offered to women by new technologies and to create and support a flexible policy toward access to credit, while seeking an operative (not only virtual) agreement among the various international associations.[31] Likewise, it was necessary to create a "new culture" of enterprise that was less hierarchical and increasingly open to a "more relational view of relations" in the business world.[32]

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the problems connected with the persistence of or reentry of mature women in the workforce and the question of productive capacities discussed at the Congress of Amsterdam in 1962.

[29] AA, *Verbali della Delegazione del Piemonte* [Piedmont Delegation' Minutes], vol.5, passim.

[30] Ibid., vol.6.

[31] *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 Dec. 1996.

[32] *Il Sole 24 Ore-Nordest*, 21 May 2001.

AIDDA's international mission was also reinforced by the consultative role obtained by the *Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales* in the context of the United Nations. At this time, AIDDA began important support initiatives for women's entrepreneurship and tasks of responsibility abroad. In 1998, for example, the European Union entrusted the AIDDA with the coordination of a project in Bosnia Herzegovina, accomplished with financing placed at their disposal by the European Commission, for the creation of entrepreneurial activities by Bosnian women.[33] They took on the problems of integration of an increasingly multiethnic society during the course of various initiatives promoted in conjunction with AIDDA that aimed, in particular, to incorporate projects and proposals for the integration of women from outside the European Community into Italian society.[34]

In a 2002 international arena characterized by turbulence and financial scandals, AIDDA approved a document to call attention to questions such as transparency and trust in company life. In this context, the association reaffirmed the ethical and cultural value of women's entrepreneurship, in addition to its social, economic, and political role. In particular, the association reiterated that it constituted an "organismo d'azione" ["an action organization"], whose main aim was to encourage "the conscious and ethical participation of women in the economic and social world."[35] In this way, AIDDA established that the social function of business and the social responsibility of the entrepreneur are at the crux of entrepreneurial ethics with respect to relationships with employees, shareholders, investors, consumers, and suppliers, as well as with public powers and mass media.[36]

## The Social Function of Enterprise

In the words of Franca Ghizzoni, president of *Aidda* Lombardy,

> For decades ownership was considered the exclusive reference to whom enterprise had to give an account of the activity carried out and how it had to be conducted. It is only in recent years . . . that an awareness has been developed, by the more enlightened component of the entrepreneurial world, of its own role, and that instruments

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[33] *Il Sole 24 Ore,* 7 March 1998.

[34] The national theme proposed by the president of the *Delegazione Piemonte* in 1999 was "Our future in 2000: the integration and formation of the new multiethnic society: the role of *Aidda* in this context, with a particular commitment to inserting women coming from outside the European Community into Italian society."

[35] Article 3 of *Aidda*'s Statute.

[36] The project was accomplished with the collaboration of Sodalitas (an association for the development of entrepreneurship in the social context promoted by Assolombarda) and by *Cele* (Center for Ethics, Law and Economics of the *Università Carlo Cattaneo di Castellanza*). The code was presented in Trieste during the 2002 *Aidda* national congress; the central theme of the debate was "*Etica e impresa al femminile nell'incertezza del continuo cambiamento e recupero dei valori economici e sociali*" [Women's Ethics and Enterprise in the Uncertainty of Constant Change and the Recovery of Economic and Social Values], *Il Sole 24 Ore,* 15 April 2002.

> and strategies of social responsibility have developed that take into consideration the set of constituencies with which companies interact.[37]

Concepts such as honest competition, fairness, correct behavior, diligence, trust, integrity, and valorization of human resources, protection of the environment, good reputation, and the value of the active and responsible commitment of the company to society as an "exemplary citizen" constitute the system of values advanced by AIDDA. The organization asserted that it adopted this code of behavior toward those engaged in enterprise, and that it considered efficiency, as well as other economic objectives, to be an entrepreneur's duty. "A company is not only a machine for obtaining profits"—declared Marina Danieli, president of the Delegazione Friuli Venezia Giulia of AIDDA—"but rather a reality with its own social dimension; the profits should be spent on innovation, on solidarity and on 'culture,' in particular in Italy."[38]

Recently, in a division "colonized" by women as both employees and experts (about 70 percent of those working in the sector are women), "enterprise communication," female leaders and managers declared that transparency and ethics were important and added strategic value for running technology and communication.[39]

Did the Italian entrepreneurial world share these ideas and proposals? Only in part. The position they represent is quite different from that of, for example, Alessandro Profumo. Managing director of Unicredit, the largest Italian banking group and one of the biggest in Europe, he agrees with the position of those who argue that "the real morals of economy should only be the market," rejecting any relationship between ethics and economics. Profumo even declared, "the concept of ethics is badly suited to describing entrepreneurial activity. Indeed one risks oversimplifying the yardstick on the validity of a business"—which must necessarily, in his opinion, be clearly linked to the correctness and transparency of everyday action, and above all to the positive value of profit of which innovation and competitiveness are essential features.[40] The culture of enterprise and of the market thus interpreted is completely independent of both geographical location and organizational and hierarchical structure. Is this great Italian banker's attitude an isolated one, or is it representative of a "rational" view of business and of the *homo oeconomicus* pertaining to male entrepreneurship?

One may think that there is a connection between the valorization of culture and emphasis on ethics and the traditional sectors of female business, such as learning and education, or health services, or small trade. However, in a technologically sophisticated sector like that of chemical pharmaceuticals, Diana Bracco, a third-generation woman entrepreneur

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Fondazione Bellisario, *Donne nella comunicazione*.
[40] *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 2007.

heading a company that is a world leader in instruments for imaging diagnostics, has several times reiterated the need for the ethical commitment of enterprise.[41] In her opinion, a company has "the duty to transmit not only economic values, but also cultural ones," and "Italy needs obligations, starting with research."[42]

## The View of Enterprise and Self-Representation

The differences in entrepreneurs' views and self-perceptions are very evident when compared to the experiences narrated by a homogeneous group of representatives of the business world. Because the data available are not very homogeneous, I make comparisons among male and female entrepreneurs utilizing the "official model of presentation of self" of the business people awarded the honor of *cavalieri del lavoro* ("Knights of Labour") between 1952 and 2006, which uses the same criteria (personal, business, family, social data) for collecting information.[43]

Until the mid-1970s, the male entrepreneurs who received the sought-after award (about 1,350 from 1952 through 2006) stressed their membership in business associations, public appointments of various sorts, and their success in introducing innovations into the production process, products, and distribution organization. More recently, they have emphasized their presence on the boards of banks. As these were mostly local and regional banks rooted in the community, their boards of directors constituted a filter that reduced the costs of financial credit transactions.

To compare the "official model of presentation of self" of women and men entrepreneurs, I did not consider areas where women historically have had less of a formal presence (for example, engineering, the electro-mechanical industry, chemistry, and pharmaceuticals)—which are, however, precisely the sectors in which Italian entrepreneurs obtained their patents and made innovations, according to the dominant technological paradigm of the Golden

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[41] She was, among other things, appointed advisor of Confindustria for technological development and innovation.

[42] Diana Bracco, *Relazione presentata al Soroptimist* [Report to Soroptimist], Milan, 26 Sept. 2002. For example, in 2002, the Gruppo Bracco invested 16% of their sales proceeds in research and development. The company, represented in 115 countries through joint-venture companies with over 3,600 operators worldwide, engaged over 600 specialists between the *Centro di Ricerche Milano* [Milan Research Center] and those operating abroad. Within the Gruppo Bracco, even though the supply of women workers with a high level of scientific competence is still inadequate in Italy (in the opinion of the woman entrepreneur), women make up 36% of the staff, the women in management over 25%, as do the women who hold the role of "mid-level executives."

[43] Although very few women received this award (32 between 1962 and 2006) compared with their male peers (2,450 since 1901), this sample is particularly useful in highlighting official representation because it uses the same criteria (personal, business, family, social, and so on) for collecting information.

Age. Instead, I examined the textile and clothing sector, traditionally considered a women's sector.[44]

TABLE 4
Activities of Textile-Clothing Entrepreneurs, 1952-2006

| Entrepreneurs (#) | Philanthropy and Activities on Behalf of Society (%) | Cultural Activities (%) | Banks (%) | Innovations (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males (92) | 35.86 | 23.91 | 11.95 | 43.47 |
| Females (11) | 36.36 | 45.45 | 0 | 9.09 |
| Total (103) | 35.92 | 26.21 | 10.67 | 39.98 |

*Source*: Archivio dei *Cavalieri del lavoro* [Archive of the Knights of Labour].

Even though innovation is a strong point highlighted by many textile entrepreneurs, I show in Table 4 that 35.86 percent of men were engaged in philanthropy, 23.91 percent in cultural activities, and 11.95 percent were involved with banks. In comparison, 36.36 percent of the women, who entered the scene beginning in the 1960s, have been engaged in social activities on behalf of society and 45.45 percent have been involved in cultural activities, but none of them with banks.

The presence of textile entrepreneurs in the banking networks and on the boards of directors of credit institutions increased in the 1990s with the privatization of Italian credit institutions. In the macro-general context of change in the scenarios of international finance, this presence is in harmony with the "financialization" of the economy. Nevertheless, women entrepreneurs do not (and cannot) represent themselves as agents of this process. Instead, they represent themselves as agents of culture, in the promotion of schools for transmitting artisanal skills and competencies and in the creation of museums and initiatives for the conservation of the history of enterprises, their founders, their creative patrimony, and territorial memory.[45]

On the other hand, culture taken to mean the system of values, ideas and convictions that forms the mindset with which one regards reality can

[44] The number of textile entrepreneurs awarded the honor, 1952-2006, was 103.

[45] In the past, women were not allowed to undertake professions or to manage firms on their own in Italy. The Renaissance, for instance, tells us much about the duration of gender stereotypes. It is no accident that the first respectable women in Europe to have professional and public careers were artists, because they were allowed to attend some cultural activities, although they were banned from most professions. Most of these female artists, just as their modern entrepreneur colleagues, acted inside their families. Learning the craft from their fathers and male relatives, the artists were not supposed to promote and sell on their own, but these activities took place in the private sphere through familial networks.

reinforce the aspects and the feelings of obligation of individuals and their coordination within a group, whether it is a local community or a network or a business.[46] In one study carried out to analyze the training process of women entrepreneurs in the northwest of Italy, for instance, most women entrepreneurs stressed the feelings of obligation (honesty, family, respect, environment and territory, work, and so on) when talking about themselves, instead of the behavior that drove them to enterprise such as competitiveness and the aspiration to improve their own social condition and wealth.[47]

In effect, the male entrepreneurs in the social representation of themselves privilege the Schumpeterian aspects, and more recently their role in financial networks, whereas the women favor the cultural aspects. In addition, the views are only in part connected with the sector of activity and the territory to which they belong. Indeed, let us try to compare a few entrepreneurs who are representatives of some regions in the south of Italy (such as Calabria, Campania, and Sardinia) still characterized by aspects of economic backwardness. One of the women entrepreneurs, Pina Mengano Amarelli, president of her family food firm created in 1731, declares that she is "engaged in a strong action aimed at combining culture and entrepreneurship."[48] Her colleague, Paola Chiariello Condorelli, in the clinical and health business, states that she has "extended the clinical and assistance activity to that of research . . . and scientific conventions at which Nobel Prize–winners have given magisterial lectures."[49]

In contrast, their male colleague Romano Fanti in Sardinia states that his group (started as a traditional real estate agency and diversified into numerous sectors, including energy, and maintaining continuous interest in the construction division), "stands out for its technological innovation combined with great environmental sensitivity."[50] In general, the views of male entrepreneurs and members of the female business world coincide only when the speakers hold institutional positions and they intervene in the role *super partes* of the large trade associations.

## Conclusion

In focusing on a new entrepreneurial identity for women in Italy that overcomes gender stereotypes connected with the family, gender-based professional and entrepreneurial associations have provided a decisive contribution, starting with AIDDA (in 1961), and continuing with the many organizations born in the 1980s. The gender-based professional networks

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[46] Lipartito, "Culture and the Practice of Business History."
[47] In this regard, see Adriana Castagnoli, "L'imprenditoria femminile in Italia nell'ultimo mezzo secolo: idealtipi e autorappresentazione" [The Women Entrepreneurs in Italy: Ideal Types and Self-Representation], *Annali di storia dell'impresa* [Business History Annals] (Venezia, 2007), 17-52.
[48] *Civiltà del Lavoro*, 5, 2006, 12.
[49] Ibid., 4, 2006, 20.
[50] Ibid., 5, 2006, 39.

indeed contributed toward changing the traditional social representation of entrepreneurship as an activity identified in the general opinion with features characteristic of the male gender.

Moreover, in the 1980s, the media activism of a new generation of managers (such as Marisa Bellisario) and of women entrepreneurs in general was important. In fact, in harmony with the new Italy of the "personalisation of leadership" and of "political show"—as happened in other countries during that period—they proposed new models of female professional success.

Italian men and women entrepreneurs tend to be represented in opposing ways. Male entrepreneurs refer to themselves as privileging the Schumpeterian aspects and more recently their role in financial networks. Women favor the cultural and ethical point of view. This dichotomy is only partially the result of the sector of activity and the territory to which they belong. In fact, more than one exception occurs when both genders express themselves at the institutional level, as representatives of the great entrepreneurial trade organizations. That is due, in part, to the fact that the gender-based organizations of women entrepreneurs, like those of other societal leaders, behave increasingly like political players.