

Translating feminism in the neoliberal era: The role of women’s entrepreneurship in East Africa vs Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal political ideas, management methods and ‘entrepreneurialism’ spread globally but are translated differently and have different implications due to contextual variations. This paper sets out to explore the implications from a feminist perspective, by comparing the highly differing contexts of Sweden, known for its equality, and the patriarchal context of East Africa. A mixed methods approach is used which includes theoretical and policy studies as well as ethnographic and interactive research. The local translations of feminism and entrepreneurialism in the respective contexts are discussed, as well as the relationship between feminism and entrepreneurialism. In a stepwise analysis we draw three main conclusions. First, we argue that austerity in the public sector in Sweden has implied a set-back for feminism. Second, we claim that in the East African countries studied, entrepreneurialism can be seen to more clearly empower women. Our third argument is that the differing outcomes can be traced back to the existence or non-existence of a benevolent, non-corrupt and ‘women-friendly’ state.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades there has been a global spread of neoliberal political ideas, management methods and ‘entrepreneurialism’. In the Scandinavian context we have, for example, witnessed a change in the welfare state and a restructuring of the relationships between the public and the private sectors, as well as a civil society inspired by ideas known as New Public Management (Hood, 1991). Since the 1980s the low income countries of the world have been required to restructure their economies in favour of private sector development and market-based economies through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), which were linked to the development assistance given (cf. Havevik et al., 1995).

As with all changes, these ideas and restructuring programmes are, however, ‘translated’ differently in different parts of the world, due to contextual variations (cf. Czarniawska & Sévon, 2005). The reforms thus vary, as do the consequences, which are not always as intended. To take an example, previous studies of NPM reforms in the Swedish context have shown that some intended consequences, such as good conditions for SMEs or an increased share of women among business owners, did not materialize (Sköld, 2015) but instead there was an unintended masculinization of some industries (Sundin & Tillmar, 2010). The same applies to some of the consequences of development assistance (Glazer, 1997) and the structural adjustment programmes. Women’s entrepreneurship is often mentioned as a solution to both economic development (Dijkgraaff, 2007) and gender inequality (Kamuzora

& Kamuzora, 2007). Neither corruption nor poverty traps (cf. Banerjee & Duflo, 2011) were intended consequences.

While the importance of context within entrepreneurship research has long been known (Gartner, 1985, GEM report 2014), it has lately been increasingly recognized (cf. Welter, 2011) in the research field. Still, it is our contention that mainstream literature on entrepreneurship, as well as policy and practice, often fall into both the androcentric and ethnocentric trap. That is, the western context and the male norm implicitly guide analysis and conclusions.

This paper sets out to explore the implications of neoliberal ideas and entrepreneurialism from a feminist perspective by comparing the highly differing contexts of Sweden, known for its equality, and the patriarchal context of East Africa. In order to avoid ethnocentrism, we use a mixed methods approach which includes theoretical and policy studies as well as ethnographic and interactive research. That is, in addition to theoretical and policy studies, this paper builds on our own previous ethnographic and interactive case studies of women's entrepreneurship in both Sweden and East Africa.

Below, we begin by discussing the case of Sweden before going into the East African cases. With regard to both contexts, we describe the relationship between the state and the feminist movement, the neoliberal turn and subsequently the situation for women entrepreneurs. The paper ends with a concluding comparative discussion.

2. Entrepreneurialism and feminism in Sweden

In the following paragraphs we describe the relationship between feminism and the state in Sweden, the move towards neoliberalism and subsequently the consequences for women's entrepreneurship in Sweden.

2.1 Swedish state feminism

The state is male in the feminist sense: the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women. The liberal state coercively and authoritatively constitutes the social order in the interest of men as a gender – through its legitimating norms, forms, relations to society, and substantive policies (MacKinnon, 1989:161-2).

The quote above is from US lawyer and Professor Catharine MacKinnon's influential book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. In her view, there can be no such thing as a woman-friendly state. Quite the contrary, said Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes (1987, 1988), who described a benevolent relationship between the state and feminist activism in the Nordic countries, and therefore labelled the Nordic welfare state the "women-friendly state". It is characterized by women's movement activism from below combined with support from above, from women in the government known as femocrats.

The femocrats are nourished and supported by women's movements, and vice versa. Women researchers at the universities are often enlisted to provide scholarly support. An example of this was the *Support Stockings* in Sweden, a network of influential feminists inside and outside government that was established in advance of the 1994 election and aimed at increasing women's representation in the Swedish parliament (they skillfully orchestrated a perception that if this did not happen they would form a feminist party). The other parties promptly made more women eligible, which resulted in the Swedish parliament becoming one of the most gender-equal in the world (Bergqvist, Olsson Blandy, & Sainsbury, 2007).

Women in Sweden have thus used the state and the parliamentary system for the advancement of women, so-called state feminism. The term state feminism is also used to denote entities within the state tasked with working for and monitoring the status of women, so-called women's policy agencies (Kantola & Outshoorn, 2007). Sweden has, for example, a Minister of Gender Equality, a Gender Equality Council, a Discrimination Ombudsman, and a policy stating that all political decisions must be reviewed from a gender-equality perspective, so-called gender mainstreaming (Bergqvist, et al., 2007). The county councils, at regional government level, have gender equality experts and regional gender equality councils.

Many of the policies of the "woman-friendly state" are designed to make it possible for women to take up paid employment. Joint taxation was replaced by individual taxation in 1971. This meant that there were benefits in women going out to work – the additional family income was not eaten up by the strongly progressive tax system Sweden had at the time. Publicly subsidized day care and pre-school for any child aged one and above, as well as 18 months of paid parental leave (for both parents combined) made it possible for a woman to combine family and gainful employment.

A comprehensive welfare system was built up during the 1960s and through the 1980s which also entailed a large expansion of the public sector in education, health care and social services. The public sector also provided employment opportunities for many women. The result was a level of labour market participation for women which stood out internationally – 83% vs. 89% for men in 2013 (Statistics Sweden, 2014), but also a highly gender-segregated labour market.

Further, policies are in place to create equal working conditions for men and women on the labour market. Sweden's Discrimination Act forbids employers to discriminate against people on the grounds of gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and age. The Act states that employers must map and analyze salary differentials between men and women who perform work of equal value, and plan how to amend such differentials. The act also regulates harassment, sexual harassment, recruitment and working conditions.

The women-friendly policies have not created absolute parity with men – women still take the main responsibility for unpaid work at home, are more likely to work part-time and often

choose professions that are lower paid than those chosen by men – but in international comparison, Sweden is ranked highly on gender equality indices (UNdata, 2012).

2.2 The move towards neoliberalism in Swedish politics

The financial crisis of the early 1990s marked a turning point in Swedish politics. The country could no longer afford all the commitments of the welfare state. Influenced by neoliberal currents from the UK and the USA, Sweden began downsizing its public sector. A wave of privatizations followed. State-owned businesses within industries such as banking, forestry and pharmaceuticals were sold during the 1990s and public real estate, the railways and telecommunications were privatized during the following decade (Gratzer, Lönnborg, & Olsson, 2010). The pharmacy and motor-vehicle inspection monopolies were dismantled in 2010 and 2012 respectively.

A school voucher system was introduced in 1992. Prior to this, only a handful of privately-owned schools existed, since they were affordable only for the wealthiest. After the reform in 1992, charging for tuition was prohibited for all schools, irrespective of ownership, but the reform opened the way for publicly-financed privately-owned schools. The school voucher, financed by money from the public purse, followed the student, who was free to choose any approved school, public or private. This resulted in many private providers. Statistics from Skolverket (the Swedish National Agency for Education) show that 20% of pre-schoolers, 14% of children in primary school and 26% of secondary school students were enrolled in private schools in 2013 (Skolverket, 2014). After Chile voted to modify their voucher system, Sweden remains, to our knowledge, the only country in the world which allows privately-owned for-profit schools that are financed by the public purse. This has caused much debate, since a number of private equity firms based in tax havens have invested in Swedish schools with the aim of selling them at a profit.

The introduction of the school voucher system was followed by partial privatization of public health care. Just as with the schools, it is still publicly financed. Services such as cleaning or catering for municipalities, hospitals and care centres were first outsourced. Then followed outsourcing of health care and care services. This phase of outsourcing was regulated by the Public Procurement Act, which allowed private firms to tender for contracts for these services. The second phase of privatization followed, with the introduction of customer choice systems in care and health care. In this system, the customer was allowed to choose her service provider freely. The service provider was then reimbursed by the municipality, based on how many customers they attracted. The result was a tax-funded ‘market’. Since 2009, the Act on System of Choice in the Public Sector (2008:962) is used in an increasing number of municipalities. The result is a mix of private and public providers, all reimbursed according to the same logic.

Neoliberal policies were accompanied by an increased emphasis on entrepreneurship, starting with Birch’s (1979) ground-breaking finding that most new jobs were created not by the larger companies but by small and new firms. Yet the ensuing discourse on entrepreneurship involved not only starting and running a business, but a major transformation in the way the

individual was conceptualized. Individuals were seen not primarily as citizens, but as producers, entrepreneurs and consumers. Markets were deregulated, publicly-owned companies were privatized, and the publicly-organized welfare state was exposed to private sector competition. A new ideology, *entrepreneurialism* (du Gay, 2004), infused all sectors of society. The neoliberal ideas of (i) private enterprise, (ii) the primacy of the market and (iii) freedom of choice for the individual became cornerstones for building a successful modern society in Sweden as well as elsewhere (Harvey, 2005). Government changed shape – from government to *governance*, where how to build a society is determined through the choices people make in a market economy. Freedom is referred to as “freedom of choice” (Lemke, 2001).

2.3 Women’s entrepreneurship in Sweden – liberation, or new forms of subordination?

The Swedish state has financed support targeted to women’s entrepreneurship since the early 1990s. Programmes have included special advisory services, mentorship, business advice, role model programmes, competitions and awards, micro-loans, training and special resource centres for women. The argumentation for the earliest efforts was radical feminist. Business ownership was believed to offer financial freedom and independence from men. The types of businesses that women were expected to start were also perceived as doing social good by providing essential services to people (Friberg, 1996). However, the government also argued that women could step in where the state stepped out – they would start their own businesses in areas the state was privatizing, such as schools, pre-schools and primary care centres (Proposition, 1993/94:140). As time went by, however, the arguments centred squarely on economic growth – women’s businesses were seen as important contributors to job creation, and since fewer women than men owned a business they were also positioned as an under-utilized resource (Ahl & Nelson, 2015). The Swedish Minister of Industry, for example, said:

Women who run companies are not only essential for growth – it is also a question of equality. (...) We can only create more jobs if we make the most of all the entrepreneurial spirit there is in Sweden. Greater opportunities for enterprising women are a pre-condition for equal conditions. This will also lead to increased levels of employment which in turn will contribute to welfare and freedom of choice – in other words, a better Sweden. (Maud Olofsson, Minister of Industry, 2009)

What, then, were the results? The percentage of businesses owned by women has indeed increased. Today 34% of all businesses are owned by a majority of women (Statistics Sweden, 2014). But women are still concentrated in small scale services, retail and care; that is, in areas with low growth and earnings potential. The privatization of women-dominated operations in the public sector did indeed result in more businesses owned by women, but in effect, the vast majority of the increase was in child care (Sköld, 2013), most likely as a result of the introduction of tax deductions for the same. Further, there was a diversity of businesses in these sectors – small scale businesses in small markets were likely to become women-owned, whereas businesses in markets where there was potential for economies of scale became oligopolized – large, male-owned businesses, often private equity firms, stepped in and cornered the market (Sundin & Tillmar, 2010, Ahl & Tillmar, 2015).

We conclude that in the Swedish context, we do not find women's entrepreneurship to be a step forward for women's position in society. Neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism in the Swedish welfare state does not seem to be much of a feminist gain.

3. Entrepreneurialism and feminism in East Africa

In the following paragraphs, we describe the relationship between feminism and the state in East Africa, the move towards neoliberalism and subsequently the consequences for women's entrepreneurship and feminism in East Africa.

3.1 Feminism and the state in East Africa

The East African states are more adequately described as male-friendly, in accordance with the quote from McKinnon (1989) above. Despite both indigenous efforts and the international donor community, the route to women-friendly states in the East African Community is still a long one. As noted by Mikell (1997), contemporary African women are walking a tightrope between nationalism *vis à vis* former colonial powers and donors on the one hand, and societal roles of women in their countries on the other. The relationship between feminism and the state is thus a complex one, which has also evolved over time. The history is complex, involving pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial developments in the countries. In fact, it has been argued that the states of Sub-Saharan Africa are just empty shells masking the more important informal relationships which govern the countries (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). Here we will describe the relationship between feminism and the states in the three large countries in the East African Community (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), with a focus on the strongest economy, which is Kenya. Since legislation in terms of ownership of property and land is a main issue for women's economic empowerment, this is our focus below.

Throughout the history of Africa, women were actively involved in the struggle against colonial powers and were also fighting for better reproductive rights. Women organized themselves in lineage, kinship groupings, religious, cultural and political groups (Berger, 2015). In Kenya, women organized themselves in work parties and in various social and welfare groups (Kinyanjui, 2012; Kamau, 2010). The groups collectively imposed sanctions on their husbands and proved their abilities to initiate widespread civil disturbances when their interests were violated. As colonialism became widespread in Kenya, some of the earlier women's organizations were restructured by missionaries and colonial government as volunteers with a degree of western education, with the aim of civilizing and uplifting the women (Kinyanjui, 2012). This resulted in groups such as the Catholic women's club the Mothers' Union in Uganda and the National Council of Women of Kenya. When their countries gained independence these women's groups redirected their energies in support of nationalist groups (Mikell, 1997; Kinyanjui, 2012). They hoped to be granted greater autonomy afterwards, but the liberation struggles ended with women being asked to retreat to subordinate roles (Mikell, 1997).

The women's movement has faced many challenges in its efforts to gain equality in political, social and economic terms due to the patriarchal nature of society (Kinyanjui, 2012). Iconic women, who could be termed 'femocrats' and who were pioneers in the women's movement, included the late professor Wangari Mathaai who started the Green Belt Movement in order to increase women's livelihoods (the Green Belt Movement, 2015.) On the political front there

were also women such as Charity Ngillu and Phoebe Asiyo who pioneered the first affirmative action in parliament (Adawo et al., 2011; Kamau, 2010). Although they were unsuccessful they created an opportunity for other female parliamentarians to push for an increase in women's representation in parliament. The struggle for affirmative action became productive with the Kenyan constitution of 2010 (Adawo et al., 2011). On the legislative level, some progress is thus being made.

In terms of legislation, however, it should be kept in mind that the ongoing reforms in all three countries start from a level with strong patriarchal structures. Kenya's land laws¹ were developed in reference to customary law in which women had no rights to own land and limited rights to access or use land. Instead, the land was owned and controlled by men (Karanja, 1991; Odeny, 2013; International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008; Constitution of Kenya, 1963). As a result, men were the first to register land under the Land Act, thereby gaining absolute ownership rights, with very few women owning land titles either individually or jointly with their husbands (Karanja, 1991; Odeny, 2013; International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008). This is despite the fact that Kenyan women constitute 80% of agricultural labour and provide an equivalent of 60% of farm-derived income (International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008). Under the old Kenyan Constitution, women, whether married or not, lacked control and ownership, and were thus unable to use land as form of collateral to access other resources such as a loan from a bank (Married Women's Property Act, International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008).

The new Constitution of Kenya enacted in 2010 is, however, a key milestone that gave hope to women, since it guaranteed gender equality under national values and principles of governance which include equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, non-discrimination and protection of the marginalized (Constitution of Kenya 2010; International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008; Blyth, 2013). It allows the application of the international statutes on equality and non-discrimination (Mbondenyei & Ambani, 2012). Furthermore, the new Constitution regulates inheritance in heritage so that discrimination between daughters and sons is not allowed and since all marriages are to be registered, including customary ones, relatives and concubines will not be able to take inheritance from the rightful wife (International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008).

Yet, since the new Constitution is far from the customary practices, there are doubts as to what will happen in real life (Gaafar, 2014; International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2008). For example, Odeny (2014) argues that the Constitution does not go deep enough in trying to understand the society itself and thus fails to address circumstances such as patriarchy and women's subordination. One issue is that in as far as effective land administration is concerned, it is a requirement that women's participation in policy formulation and at the level of implementation is on an equal footing with men (Gaafar, 2014; Blyth, 2013).

¹ the Trust Land Act, The Land Adjudication Act, the Land Consolidation Act and the Land Disputes Tribunal Act.

In the case of Tanzania, after independence in the 1960s President Julius Nyerere set up a legal system based on African socialism, where all the land in the country was held by the government on behalf of the people (Hayuma, 2004; Duncan, 2014; Rwebangira, 1996). Tanzania subscribes to some international rights conventions that uphold property rights for women and girls and equal rights for women and men. The country currently has an ambitious, albeit incomplete, agenda for land and natural resources policy reforms (Reuters, 2014). The 1977 Tanzanian Constitution guarantees every person the equal right to own property and explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination (Brown et al., 2003; Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977; Ezer, 2006; Carpano, 2010). However, customary land rights continued to exist in tandem with statutory laws. The Constitution does not contain any direction in relation to customary laws that are not in tandem with women's equal rights to property (Duncan, 2014; Rwebangiraa, 1996). While the country has taken initiatives to increase the number of women in land-related decision-making bodies (Carpano, 2010; Rwebangiraa, 1996; Duncan, 2014), in practice, village assemblies are often dominated by men (Carpano, 2010; Rwebangiraa, 1996). In the rural areas, patriarchal practices continue. Men are the superiors and the heads of the household and thus continue to have greater rights to land than do women. The law is weak as far as women's inheritance rights to land is concerned and women are discriminated as far as inheritance is concerned (Duncan, 2014; Carpano, 2010).

Uganda, too, has a complex legal system that combines pre-independence British law, Ugandan civil law and customary law (Hannay, 2014). The country's Constitution from 1995 states that all land is owned by its citizens; however, the state retains the right to acquire land in the public interest but with reference to constitutional protections (Ssenyonjo, 2007). The Constitution marked the start of the ongoing reforms that have sought to increase women's rights under the formal framework (Ssenyonjo, 2007). It prohibits discrimination based on gender and accords men and women the same status and rights. In addition, both sexes have equal right to own property. It further prohibits any customary laws, traditions or customs that discriminate against women, in the light of historical discrimination towards women (Tripp, 2004; Veit, 2011). Just as in Kenya and Tanzania, the women of Uganda in practice still struggle to achieve the equality and non-discrimination due to conflicting norms in the customary law as well as political unwillingness to tackle institutional discrimination (Asiimwe, 2001). Research shows that 80% of land in Uganda is held under undocumented customary tenure systems (Veit, 2011).

Uganda is taking some measures to ensure female participation in implementation. Land management bodies and institutions are required to have female representation. The Uganda Land Commission must at least have two females among five members (Hannay 2014). On the district land boards 1/3 must be female; the area land committees at parish level must have a minimum of one female for every four members. 1/3 of the members of the communal land association must be female (Ssenyonjo, 2007; Hannay, 2014). Although the Land Act is quite explicit and advanced in establishing protections for women's land rights, it falls short of setting co-ownership rights among spouses (Hannay, 2014; Asiimwe, 2001).

In sum, despite the constitutions and other statutory laws in these countries, patriarchal systems seem to subordinate women's rights to land and property ownership. Although the statutory law does not prevent women from owning property, the reality in which they live curtails their right to land and property ownership (Asiimwe, 2001). Certain customary practices such as the paying of the bride price, and polygamy, which are practised in all three countries, reduce women's security in relation to land. The culture of paying bride price is seen as making a woman the property of her husband, which nullifies any claims she might have to land and transfers her property rights to her husband.

3.2 The move towards neoliberalism in East Africa

After independence, the three large East African countries followed somewhat different routes. While Tanzania under Julius Nyerere implemented socialist policies, Kenya followed a more liberal and market-oriented route, while Uganda positioned itself in between. All three countries were and are, however, heavily donor-dependent. This meant that when the international donor community imposed liberalization of African economies through the so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) in the 1980s and 1990s via the IMF, World Bank and UNDP, the effects and transitions required differed among the three large East African countries due to the differences.

In all three countries, the international trend of neoliberalization had profound effects. The terminology within the donor community has changed somewhat over the years, but private-sector development, commercial-sector support and entrepreneurship support have been common components of development programmes. In Tanzania, for example, SIDO (Small Industries Development Organization), TCCIA (Tanzanian Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture) and PSDF (Private Sector Development Fund) are some of the organizations receiving both multilateral and bilateral development support, including from the Scandinavian countries. In the aftermath of the success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, many programmes directed towards various sectors also included a component of micro-credits. These schemes ranged from formal credits from accredited financial institutions, via so-called informal micro-credits from NGOs and donor-supported organizations (such as PRIDE Africa), to SACCOS (Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies) and indigenous local initiatives such as women's groups (*vyamas*) (Lindvert et al, in press, Kinyanjui, 2012). Micro-credits in all forms often target women in particular. The various organizations working for women's entrepreneurship far from always equip women with gender awareness. Even fewer support initiatives equip men with gender awareness.

At the same time, donor support is directed to women's rights. At the end of the 1990s, women's groups received 30% of the donor funds to civil society in Kenya (Mumbi, Ngugi, SAREAT, 1998). However, the projects supported are not necessarily in line with the indigenous feminist movements. Critical voices argue that women's rights groups operating under the umbrella of NGOs were conceived under neoliberalism and, knowingly or otherwise, are participating in the imperial project (Shivji, 2007).

It is argued that these women's rights bodies do not actually participate in policy making, but rather implement donor-driven policies in a context that is completely different from that of

the donors (Shivji, 2007). While some NGOs may be deeply involved with and celebrated by the people whom they purport to serve, NGOs, by their nature, ultimately derive not only their sustenance but also their legitimacy from the donor community, and its anti-state stance (ibid). Indigenous initiatives exist in parallel. One example is the hunger strike for human rights undertaken by mothers of prisoners Nairobi in 1992, and the subsequent actions of the organization National Committee on the Status of Women (1992). This led to some achievements in terms of the representation of women in parliament (Nzomo, 1997). Yet the relationship between the women's movements and the state remains a complex and contradictory one in most African countries. State leaders have resisted women's involvement in decision making, since they do not accept their right to influence (Mikell, 1997). This cultural situation is more determining than the façade of modern state (ibid, cf. Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

3.3 Entrepreneurialism and economic empowerment for women?

East African women thus find themselves in a complex context of patriarchy on the one hand, and neoliberalism and imperialism on the other. Of course, different women take different stances in these respects. While constitutional improvements for women are ongoing, local level practices change more slowly, as explained above. The origin of the statement that “women carry Africa on their heads” is obvious for those who have been in East Africa. On a gender level, African feminism differs from western in that it is more collectively oriented and pro-natal (Mikell, 1997).

Kenyan researcher and feminist Mary Kinyanjui (2012) argues that many Kenyan women redefined their investment in local level development to self-organizing social alliances through local self-help groups. These social alliances provide a livelihood for the women, as well as playing a key role in confronting the patriarchal system. Some such groups are working towards change using dance and articulating their rights in the context of a major effort which includes family friends and neighbours. They speak out against discrimination and assert their rights in the community (ibid). Women's groups which initially started as a way of addressing household needs, social needs and market coordination later evolved to address the experiences of women regarding discrimination and economic subordination by the patriarchal system (ibid).

In factor-driven economies like the East African, surplus labour makes self-employment necessary for subsistence. Early-stage entrepreneurial activity is more common in the East African region² than in any other part of the world (GEM report 2015), for both males and females. Unfortunately, the discontinuation rate is also the highest. Although it is widely recognized that female entrepreneurs outnumber male entrepreneurs in African countries, their businesses are also smaller and less profitable (Pedersen, 2001). Self-employed women as a group often belong to the poorest of the poor (cf. Komugisha Tindiwesi, 2007).

² The country representing the region in the GEM studies is Uganda (through researchers at Makerewe University.)

Obstacles for women entrepreneurs³ such as a heavy domestic workload and lack of access to finance have been relatively well-explored (Kibera & Kibera, 1999). Since the male-friendly state includes corruption and patriarchal norms and values, women also lack access to commercial justice (Ellis et al., 2007; Tillmar, 2015). In this context, entrepreneurship is risky business (Bowen, 2001), not the least for women who lack the social capital accessed by male networks (cf. Komugisha Tindiwensi, 2007).

Entrepreneurship is hence not a miracle medicine for women's empowerment, or an escape from patriarchy. Our previous studies clearly illustrate how the patriarchal order is also reproduced in entrepreneurship contexts (Tillmar, 2015, forthcoming 2016). Projects working for B4D (Business for Development) hence far from automatically lead to B4E (Business for Equality) (Tillmar, 2015b) in the long run.

Having said that, we should recall that the East African states are still far from women-friendly. Unemployment is very high, leaving many women completely dependent on their husbands. In practice, women's rights in the workplace are very weak. Even the formal right to maternity leave among state employees is limited to a few months, and the state does not, of course, provide child care or elderly care assistance. Parental leave for fathers is not on the agenda, and it is hard to see that it will be on the agenda in the foreseeable future. This implies that on the micro-level, and in the short and medium term, entrepreneurship can give women some economic independence and hence a certain degree of empowerment.

In the midst of the patriarchal obstacles, our studies also show examples of the agency of women entrepreneurs, their everyday innovative capacity (Tillmar, forthcoming 2016) and how it helps them not only to sustain the livelihoods of themselves and their children, but also to fund education for both sons and daughters. A positive interpretation is that entrepreneurship can actually be seen as a means to pursue feminist action, previously termed FemInc.Ism (Ahl et al., 2014). Our cases stem from an interview study of 60 entrepreneurs (30 women and 30 men) in the urban centres of the three countries. The promising examples include: a widow in Tanzania funding her children's secondary school by means of her retail shop for local food-processing items; a woman in Kenya whose husband is no longer supporting her, who breeds rabbits in order to fund the education of her adolescent children, who are also the workers on the rabbit farm; a widowed market vendor in Uganda who is the bread-winner for her own six children and three other dependents who are orphans of relatives.

Also, one step above this subsistence level, our cases show how entrepreneurship has given women some economic independence⁴. One well-educated woman in Uganda, for example, used her husband's unwillingness to allow her to do business outside the home as a business

³ In this text, I use the words entrepreneur, self-employed and business owner interchangeably, with the same meaning. However, in the research project, these phenomena will be properly defined and differentiated, as will the concepts female and women.

⁴ Both these cases have previously been narrated in more detail in a book chapter on women's innovations (Tillmar, in press).

opportunity when she opened a home-based shop for second hand clothing. She simultaneously gained both ‘a room of her own’ (in the sense of Wolf, 1929/1984) and some economic freedom. Another woman in Tanzania challenged the patriarchal gender order by choosing her business instead of her unsupportive husband, got a divorce and now lives on the proceeds of a business in the male-labelled poultry industry.

In sum, East Africa has a long route to a welfare state redistributing resources to women, children and the elderly. Until there is wealth to distribute, and an independent state integrated into local norms and practices (cf. Chabal and Daloz, 1999), it would be naïve to imagine a feminist women-friendly state. While continuing to strive in that direction, and striving to increase the wealth to distribute, empowering women through entrepreneurship is not such a bad idea.

4. Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have drawn three main conclusions.

First, we argue that the neoliberally-inspired reforms implying austerity in the public sector, and increasing focus on entrepreneurialism in Sweden have primarily implied a set-back for feminism.

Second, we claim that in the East African countries studied, while the neoliberal entrepreneurialism often imposed by the donor is problematic in many respects, entrepreneurship more clearly empowers women.

Our third argument, implicit in our discussion, is that the differing outcomes can be traced back to the existence or non-existence of a benevolent, non-corrupt and ‘women-friendly’ state. Imposing neoliberalism on a male-friendly state simply does not pose as many drawbacks to women as imposing it on a women-friendly state. Yet we have also concluded that women’s entrepreneurship is by no means a miracle medicine against patriarchy and for gender equality. Instead, our analysis shows that state feminism is more successful in this respect.

In the best of worlds, every nation should, therefore, practise state-feminism. However, a pre-requisite for such a scenario is a trustworthy state. That, in turn, first requires not only an independent state which is well integrated with local norms and traditions, but also a certain level of well-being in the community. Otherwise, corruption and subsequently distrust will inevitably result. Well-being can result from economic growth, if the wealth remains within the country to a sufficient extent and also trickles down to small-holders and women entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship among women is hence a feasible strategy for empowerment in East Africa in the short and medium perspective, and also from a feminist perspective, if combined with other structural changes including educational efforts regarding gender.

This paper has shown the importance of considering the embedded context when theorizing intended and unintended gendered consequences of reforms in general, and the move towards neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism in particular. The examples given here illustrate that the existence of a ‘women-friendly state’ is an important structural dimension influencing the outcome.

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