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Article

Gender Stereotypes Could Push Women Away From Entrepreneurship

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Vishal Gupta believes the way that entrepreneurship is presented, discussed and taught must change — especially for women.

“Where are the role models for women?” asks Gupta, an assistant professor of strategy at Binghamton University. “Pick up any book on entrepreneurship: It’s all about men. Switch on the TV, and when it comes to entrepreneurs, it is Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

Where are the women entrepreneurs? They’re not being talked about.” Of course, there have been many high-profile female entrepreneurs over the past half-century. The accomplishments of Oprah Winfrey, Estée Lauder and Debbi Fields are easily as impressive as those of Gates, Jobs, Richard Branson and Vidal Sassoon. But the failure to highlight the work of female entrepreneurs is exacerbated by societal stereotypes that often link entrepreneurship to masculine characteristics.

Gupta, who has devoted much of his research career to entrepreneurship, finds that gender stereotypes can discourage women from starting their own businesses, while gender-neutral messages prove most appealing to them.

“Some people say that the question of gender difference is timeless: It has always been there with us,” he says. “My research goes deeper into the question: Do men and women differ when it comes to entrepreneurship?”

To help answer the question, Gupta and colleagues Daniel Turban at the University of Missouri and Nachiket Bhawe from the University of Minnesota distributed articles about attributes of entrepreneurs to more than 465 undergraduate business students who were divided into random groups.

“A lot of what we know about gender differences tends to be anecdotal or based on archival data, such as the Census,” Gupta says. “What we did was bring in the random-experiment approach, which is popular in fields like biology, medicine and agriculture. And the nice thing



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about random experiments is that they take the guesswork from your analysis.”

In the study, one group’s article simply said entrepreneurship could be best taught through business education. Another group was told that stereotypical male characteristics such as risk-taking and aggressiveness produce the best entrepreneurs. A third group received the female stereotype, reading that characteristics such as social skills and networking are key for entrepreneurship. Another group learned that the best entrepreneurs have characteristics of both men and women, such as creativity. “You wouldn’t think there would be systematic entrepreneurial differences between men and women in these students,” Gupta says. “They were all business students exposed to the same knowledge and opportunities.”

Gupta and his colleagues determined that both men and women assimilated to the subtle reminders about social beliefs and entrepreneurship. When men and women were told that entrepreneurship is about male characteristics, men were more interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Women were less interested in entrepreneurship, which shows the power of societal beliefs. As Gupta points out, when we are subconsciously exposed to them, it can affect the way we think. Women also showed little ambition for entrepreneurship after reading the female-stereotype article.

“When we presented the feminine information, nothing happened. Why? Because it is not consistent with what students are seeing and hearing in society about entrepreneurs,” Gupta says.

Women shared equal entrepreneurial aspirations with men only when the gender-neutral attributes were presented. Gupta was particularly surprised by how clear our results were about the effects of exposing people to those societal beliefs in subconscious ways. Changing the way entrepreneurship is discussed starts not only with reaching young people, but also by always presenting it as an option for men and women.

“We never explicitly say that (entrepreneurship) is for men and not women,” Gupta says. “But implicitly, that’s what we are signaling. How? By emphasizing masculine characteristics.”

Gupta points to arguably the most popular television show with an entrepreneurial focus, Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice*.

“What that show is doing is turning women away from being entrepreneurs because they’re looking at it and thinking, ‘That’s not me,’” Gupta says. “It so blatantly emphasizes those stereotypical masculine characteristics. When I watch TV, I have to work really hard to find role models for my female students, especially business role models.”

Even when there is a successful female entrepreneur, the

media can still present her in a negative light, Gupta says. One such example is a movie about Martha Stewart called Martha, Inc.

"If you saw that movie, you would not want your daughter to be an entrepreneur," Gupta says. "They show Martha Stewart as selfish and only looking out for herself at an early age. That's a big problem. You have to emphasize that entrepreneurs are people who contribute positively to the economy and society."

Gupta also would like to see the stories of female entrepreneurs "front and center" in textbooks with an emphasis on success "while retaining their feminine identity."

Gupta plans to further analyze Hollywood's role in entrepreneurship. He has identified movies that deal with the subject and hopes to answer the question: Can movies with female entrepreneurs reduce some of the differences in men's and women's interest in becoming entrepreneurs?

Educators, scholars and activists can all learn lessons from the gender-entrepreneurship research, Gupta says, ranging from the need to promote role models to the power of random experiments in examining the challenges that lie ahead.

"Social beliefs, especially about gender roles and professions, are very entrenched in society," he says. "They can change, but they take a long time to change. If we want to change the gender image of entrepreneurship, it won't be an easy job."

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