

# INVISIBLE PARTICIPATION

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# CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT THE BOOK</b> .....	6
<b>A BLIND SPOT</b> .....	9
A book that galvanises .....	12
<b>WHAT IF WE ARE THWARTING EQUALITY?</b> .....	15
Do we know what equality is? .....	18
The art of focus-switching .....	23
<b>WHAT IS AN INVESTMENT?</b> .....	29
The family gives competitive advantages... ..	31
Obvious to share ownership.....	34
<b>FAILED TO CRACK THE CODE</b> .....	39
<b>WHAT STORY DO WE WANT TO TELL?</b> .....	43
Single, yet multiple .....	45
The normative stories.....	47
The parallel stories .....	57
<b>WHICH MARRIAGES SHALL WE WRECK?</b> .....	60
Entrepreneurship before children .....	64
Constant frustration.....	70
Suddenly a management issue.....	76
<b>WHAT DO WE DO NOW?</b> .....	81
<b>THE WAY AHEAD</b> .....	85

## ABOUT THE BOOK

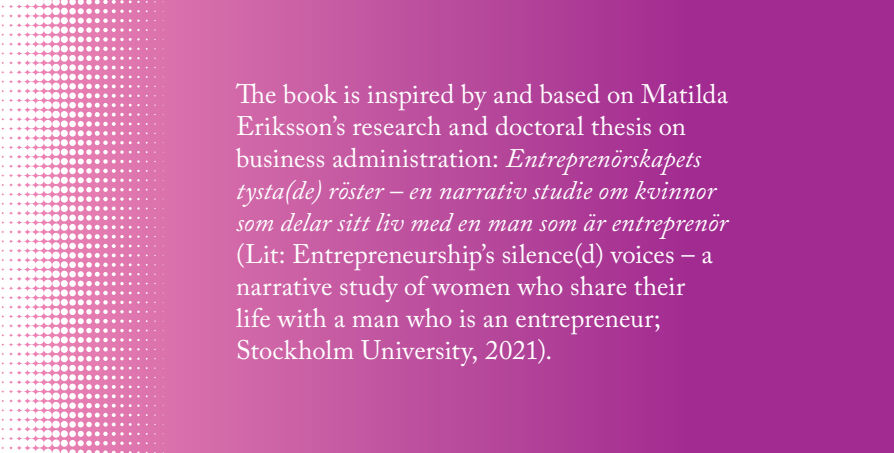
This is not a book that aims to show you what is right or wrong. Nor is it a course on equality or an attempt to paint a comprehensive picture of perspectives on gender and family configurations. We will only, for instance, be talking about man as entrepreneur and woman as spouse or partner.

The point is not to be discriminatory; we are doing this because the statistics show that many more men than women start companies – and that men receive a much greater share of the absolute support available for innovation and enterprise.

We are also aware that the categories *women* and *men* are not two homogenous groups, and that there are individuals who do not identify themselves within the binary or couple relationship norm. However, there are at present two legal genders in Sweden – women and men – and it is largely on these genders that gender equality policies are based.

Our – that is Linköping Science Park – intention with the book is to discuss the content of the intersection between two government missions – the promotion of entrepreneurship *and* gender equality. We hope to broaden the view of what equality means in the fields of entrepreneurship and enterprise and to foreground new voices and perspectives so that we can discuss how to use the new knowledge generated.

Therefore the *we* used in the book is a collective we. Because the book has been written by us, for us and for those who are currently overlooked. We do this to visibilise everyone who is needed to make sure that entrepreneurship works.



The book is inspired by and based on Matilda Eriksson's research and doctoral thesis on business administration: *Entreprenörskapets tysta(de) röster – en narrativ studie om kvinnor som delar sitt liv med en man som är entreprenör* (Lit: Entrepreneurship's silence(d) voices – a narrative study of women who share their life with a man who is an entrepreneur; Stockholm University, 2021).

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It’s my husband and his meetings that take precedence if the kids get sick.

But if I’m not at work, the hospital might have to close a theatre and someone with cancer won’t be operated on. That’s also something to bear in mind.”

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**PARTNER OF AN ENTREPRENEUR**



## **A BLIND SPOT**

The first time I heard Matilda Eriksson, doctor of business administration at Stockholm University, present the results of her research, it was as if the roof of the auditorium lifted. *How* could we have missed these perspectives at work?

I have to admit that my point of departure on equality was about how we could encourage more women to become entrepreneurs, managers, directors, investors and owners. And to help inspire more children and young adults – especially girls – to learn how to code.

Rarely, if ever, had I thought about the role played by the partner in the creation of successful businesses. Not even when a well-known entrepreneur talked about how he had foregone family dinners to focus on his company did the penny drop. Above all, the sacrifices the entrepreneur had made saddened me. But I thought little about what the partner enabled by taking care of the home and supporting him, or what their financial agreement looked like.

Naturally, the innovation-support system is to promote economic growth and equality. And of course, the backers want to see quantifiable results, even if we often grapple with what key ratios are relevant and how we are to go about following them up.

Our work therefore becomes even harder if we are expected to take a system view, ponder on underlying factors and take in as many different perspectives as possible. Because if there is one thing that Matilda's research has given us, it is new perspectives. At the same time, what we need to do is obvious. Our task is to see the whole picture, because only then will the hidden assets become more salient.

If we factor in the entire economic and social capital that supports and enables the entrepreneur, another narrative than the one to which we are accustomed takes shape. Because commonly it is thanks to his partner that the entrepreneur is better placed to succeed and generate the economic growth that ultimately not only benefits the company, town and region, but also strengthens Sweden as a whole.



It goes without saying that the whole picture should be factored in and discussed with the entrepreneur, even within the confines of our job – which, if the government wants to create true equality, should therefore include shedding light and providing guidance on these perspectives too. Because there are plenty of tools to use, for which the dialogue is a solid starting point.

The question I have been asking myself recently is how much inequality depends on our doing as we have always done without further reflection. If I turn the question round, we might wonder what kind of entrepreneur does *not* want to bring prosperity to his family, who does *not* want to give his partner and children better financial stability. How does the entrepreneur himself regard the value that his family brings to the business? How would it have fared if they had not existed?

If we are unsure about the value of the people closest to the entrepreneur, we can always consider the opposite – what things would be like without them.

## A BOOK THAT GALVANISES

As innovation-support systems, we often talk about our role and responsibility. We are a kind of intervening agent operating across boundaries and promoting a wide variety of processes.

We are incubators, science parks and innovation hubs. We are human-centred go-betweens, liaising between research and the private and public sectors.

How we lead, the spaces we provide and the culture we nurture, the questions we ask, the people we summon and the dialogues we hold – it all makes a difference. Our job is to create spaces and environments for complex contexts. For learning and collaborations that can change the system.

When the innovation environments are at their best, this is exactly what we do – and I think we can be even better at it.

There is one thing I know about blind spots. They require us to resign ourselves to the fact of their existence. And that is because they tell us that there are things out there, people and stories, that we know nothing about – yet.

Therefore I hope that this book will *galvanise* you as you read it. That it irritates you, sparks your curiosity and inspires you. Because this means that you have also taken note of a previous blind spot. The question is what you want to do about it.

**LENA MIRANDA**, CEO of Linköping Science Park





”

I’m involved, but never seen. So I see myself as a kind of invisible participant or something. Because I’m there enabling everything, but not really.”

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## WHAT IF WE ARE THWARTING EQUALITY?

According to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, the word equality means that men and women have the same rights, obligations and opportunities. The key word in that sentence is *have* – not that it *shall* or *should* be the case, or that we are *aiming* for equality. In other words, it is only when we are equal in all areas of life – everywhere and always – that we are equal.

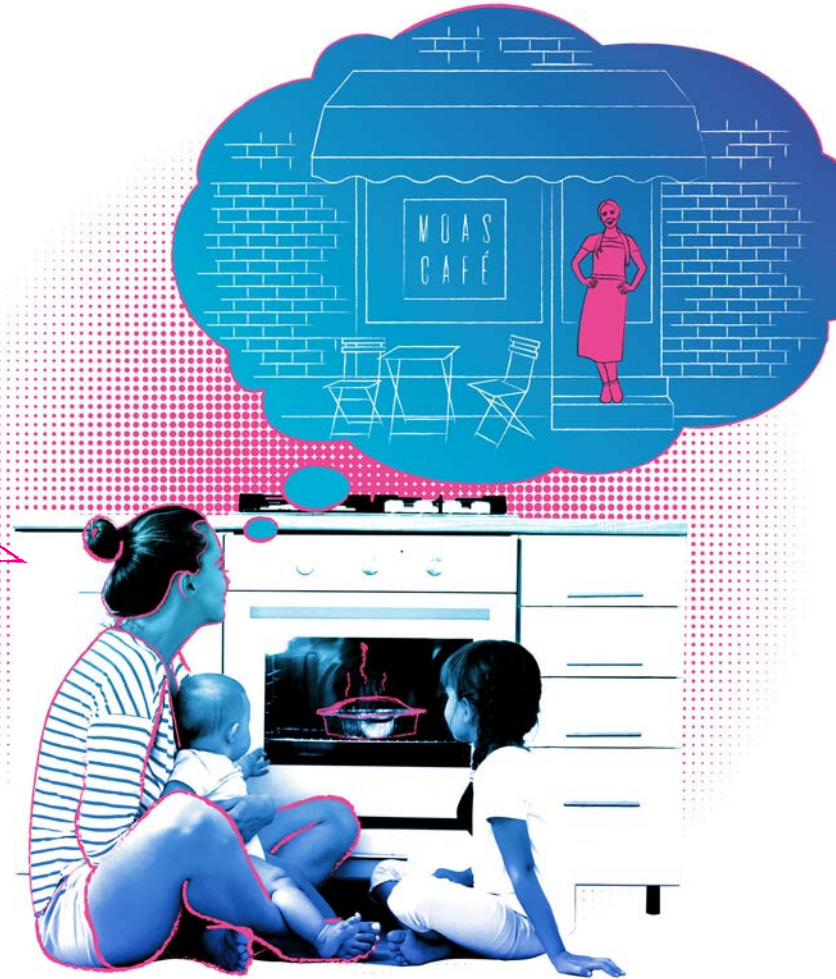
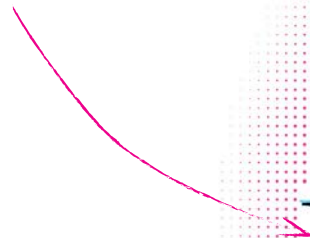
You might have seen the statistics saying that 70 per cent of companies are run by men (Eklund, 2021), that men receive 92.5 per cent of absolute support from the public purse, and that 99 per cent of Swedish venture capital goes to men.

One of the six subsidiary goals of the government’s equality policy is to achieve equality in the distribution of unpaid domestic work and nurturing. So it is not even enough to have equality at work to be truly equal.



And this is where it gets interesting. What if we have created a system in which we are actually *thwarting* equality without knowing it?

Because if equality is about so much more than sorting out the gender balance, why have *all* equality initiatives – tied to entrepreneurship and innovation – that the Swedish government has rolled out over the past few decades been about promoting female enterprise?





## DO WE KNOW WHAT EQUALITY IS?

The innovation-support system was set up to promote a level of growth in line with the government's equality policy objectives. This requires the actors to work towards an equal distribution of power and influence, financial and educational equality, equality of health, the end of men's violence against women – and an equal distribution of unpaid domestic work and nurturing.

At the same time, we seem to disagree about what we mean by equality. So much is evident when we look at a couple of dozen documents – including Europa 2020, the government's Partnership Agreement, the National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Growth and Attractiveness, the National Innovation Strategy and regional development plans, business plans, programmes of action and project applications.

- ▶ **AT EU LEVEL**, we talk about *equality between men and women*.
- ▶ **AT REGIONAL AND PROJECT LEVEL**, we talk instead about *equality between women and men who run companies*.

At EU and national level, the emphasis is on working towards equality between women and men and ensuring that they have the same access to the resources provided by the regional growth programmes, with the aim to have business support distributed evenly.

At regional level, however, another picture emerges. Here, they say things like “the more equal distribution of parental leave and better opportunities for full-time work, particularly among women, help to improve equality and agency”. And we find that while the advice from one actor is based on “the equal treatment of all groups of businesspeople”, another wants “all businesspeople regardless of gender and ethnicity to gain access to the support offered on equal terms”.

In practice, then, we have opted to reinterpret the EU directive so that it only includes a small component of the equality it calls for. If we operate from that perspective, we will never achieve equality as defined by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency.

Another hurdle is the previously unknown conflict of objectives, which Matilda Eriksson identified in her doctoral thesis – and which was the eye-opener and inspiration for this book.

The research makes it crystal clear that an entrepreneur does better if he is able to focus on his company while his partner takes care of the home and children. But we can hardly call ourselves equality advocates if the government helps men to start and run companies that they then own and control at the expense of women.



”

Living with an entrepreneur is a lifestyle. It's about round-the-clock calls, texts and emails – and being constantly prepared. It's not just a job, it's also a price to pay. It wouldn't have lasted nine years if I also hadn't been on board with it. This is his dream, but it's definitely no easy ride living in it.”

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## **THE ART OF FOCUS-SWITCHING**

In addition to being a doctor of business administration, Matilda Eriksson has also spent ten years as a project manager at Västerås Science Park, supporting and growing entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs and innovation. She is even married to an entrepreneur.

She says that if we genuinely want to increase equality in the innovation-support system and entrepreneurship, we need to learn how to focus-switch – to entertain two conflicting thoughts or perspectives on entrepreneurship simultaneously.

If you drive, you already know what it means to focus-switch. To proceed, you need to be able to read and understand road signs and remember the Highway Code. You must also be able to read the road and adjust your driving style accordingly. In other words, you need to shift focus between the rules of the road and what the traffic is actually doing. Rather than the one perspective being truer than the other, they co-exist and complement each other.

Another example of focus-switching is the kind of optical illusion known as the “hidden figure” picture, where you can see two completely different motifs in one image. Maybe you see an old crone, or is it a young woman? The motifs exist simultaneously in one and the same picture, but to see them you have to focus on them one at a time. Neither motif is truer than the other, and neither can exist without the other. The line that forms the crone's nose in one perspective is the young woman's cheek in the other.

“It's only when we've learned to focus-shift that we can understand the complexity inherent to entrepreneurship

and equality,” says Matilda Eriksson. “Because it’s never the case that one single answer solves all the problems. We can help entrepreneurs *and* enhance equality, but then we need to remember that many perspectives, thoughts and stories co-exist.”

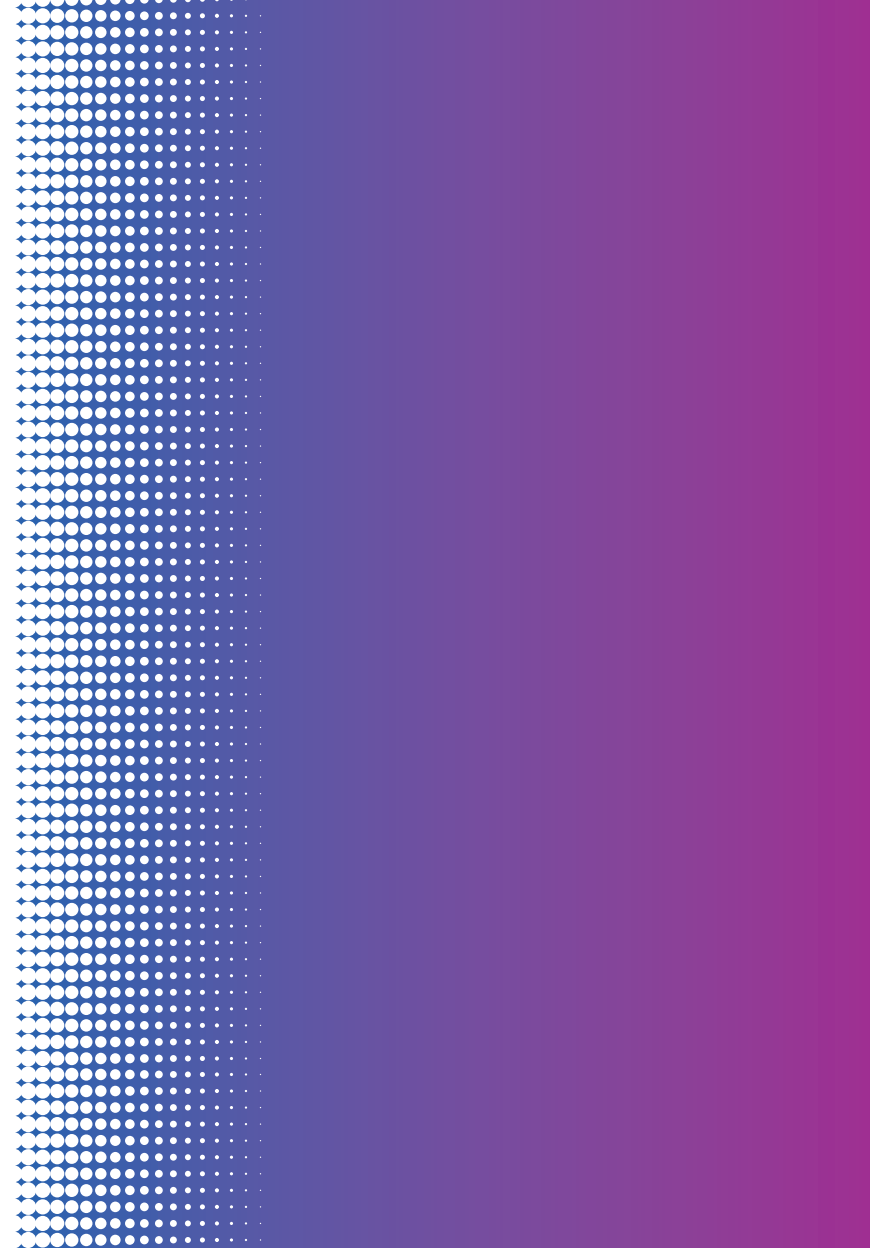
Matilda’s initial thoughts about what would eventually form her doctoral thesis came to her when she went on parental leave with her first baby.



Suddenly I was also to view my workplace at a distance. And since I’m married to an entrepreneur I could take a step back and look at my own life as partner. That’s when I found myself reflecting on a ton of questions. Why do we talk about entrepreneurship in one way but not in another? Why do we support entrepreneurship in the way we do, and what is it exactly that we’re supporting? And what can our actions, despite our good intentions, lead to that we’re currently unable to visualise?”

In Matilda’s office, the discussion was had in one way; at home with her partner, in another.

“Even if the words we used were different and we were approaching things from different angles, everyone talked about the same phenomenon, but from different perspectives. My colleagues focused on the company. My husband and I talked in terms of our family. It was then that I discovered that there were many ways to discuss entrepreneurship, many different stories. Stories that are considered incapable of co-existing and communicating with each other.”





- ▶ **BETWEEN 2009 AND 2011**, men who run companies received over SEK 1,431 million (92.5 per cent) in absolute support, while women who run companies received SEK 116 million (7.5 per cent) (The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2013).
- ▶ **THE UNEQUAL SHARE** of government support widens income disparity between businesswomen and businessmen, which ultimately exacerbates gender inequality in lifetime earnings (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2020).
- ▶ **THERE IS AN CONSIDERABLE IMBALANCE** of company ownership, where men own more than twice as much as women (Heikensten et al., 2019).

- ▶ **STUDIES SHOW THAT** entrepreneurs with spouses have a twenty per cent greater chance of business success (Fairlie and Robb, 2008).
- ▶ **STUDIES SHOW THAT COMPANIES** are more likely to thrive and perform well if the owner is married than if the owner is unmarried and single. The differences are most salient when the two largest shareholders have spouses (Fairlie and Robb, 2008, and Belenzon et al., 2016).
- ▶ **STUDIES ALSO SHOW THAT FAMILIES** that hold an open and cooperative dialogue at home – and solve their problems together – boost the business’s performance (Sorenson et al., 2009).

”

We've agreed that if the company's going to thrive, most of the days off to look after our kids when they're sick will be taken by me. I do a lot at home. But for how long? That's how I feel now, because I've been at it for quite a few years.”

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## **WHAT IS AN INVESTMENT?**

This question might seem superfluous. Everyone knows what an investment is, right? Or do they?

According to the dictionary, an investment is the purchase of an asset that is expected to produce earnings in the future. For example, you invest when you buy art or real estate, or acquire shares in a listed company.

In everyday parlance, it can mean spending a certain amount of time and energy on something. We can invest in a relationship by giving our partner our attention and time. We can invest in our body by training and taking care with our diet.

If, however, we talk about investments that benefit an entrepreneur, things quickly get trickier. Let us say that the entrepreneur uses the family car. Does this count as an investment on the part of the family? Or is it not an investment at all, because the family did not buy the car with the sole intent of supporting the entrepreneur?



What's it like living with an entrepreneur? I provided for my husband for the first twenty years.”

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## **THE FAMILY GIVES COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES**

The family is one of humanity's most important social units, which makes it interesting as much to entrepreneurship as any other field of research. However, the researchers tend to focus on the company instead of the family, and if the family is mentioned, it is often because the entrepreneur's partner or children are also involved in the company.

Therefore more studies are needed. The roles and attitudes of the family and everything they do to support the entrepreneur have been identified as areas of research interest by the likes of Randerson et al. (2015) and Nordqvist and Melin (2010).

Research shows that the financial resources furnished by family members constitute an important competitive advantage for the company (Wolf and Frese, 2018). Such resources could just as well be borrowing the family car as the partner looking after the home and children, or the entrepreneur living on the family savings rather than taking out a salary from the company.

There is also evidence that men whose partners take more responsibility for the home are more likely to reap commercial success one year after startup than those who do not have the same support (Eddleston and Powell, 2012). In purely practical terms this is hardly a mystery. If the partner takes greater responsibility for the home and perhaps contributes an income to the household, the entrepreneur will have more time to put into the company. The question is whether the partner has invested in the company.



The importance of having a supportive partner also emerges from Williams (2004), published as part of a broader research project analysing the relationship between entrepreneurship and childcare policies. Williams' analysis is based on data from the European Community Household Panel Survey, a longitudinal study of the populations of fifteen European countries, and shows that the time spent caring for children significantly reduces the duration of self-employment ventures, for both men and women.

A partner who is mentally engaged in the business concept is a vital asset in a company's early stages, helping it to achieve its objectives. A partner who is explicitly uncommitted, on the other hand, is a cause of stress and conflict between the company and the family, and an obstacle to business growth (Van Auken and Werbel, 2006).

Although family members clearly exert a significant influence on entrepreneurship, they are not especially visible in the literature. Researchers therefore call for more studies in the field so that the extent to which everything the family contributes to the success of the company and the entrepreneur can be fully understood.

From an equality perspective, it can of course be problematic that a man focuses on his company while his female partner takes care of every other aspect of family life, perhaps to the extent of foregoing her own career. And we have not even come to what can happen in the event of a divorce or if the partner is written out of the company when the investors step in.

Seen from a growth perspective, however, these women are doing everything right by following the recipe of success for the family entrepreneur.



## OBVIOUS TO SHARE OWNERSHIP

Sara Wimmercraz is a Swedish entrepreneur, investor and co-founder of Footway and BackingMinds.

“I think that one of the most important things about this is the understanding and insight of all couples who have to combine entrepreneurship with life in general. Naturally, we support each other when we’re in love, which stops us thinking about what will happen if we one day have to separate.”

She means that sharing ownership between couples while protecting future investors would need to be the obvious way to proceed. This could be achieved by the couple owning a company within the company and signing agreements regulating who can and should have influence over the company going forward.

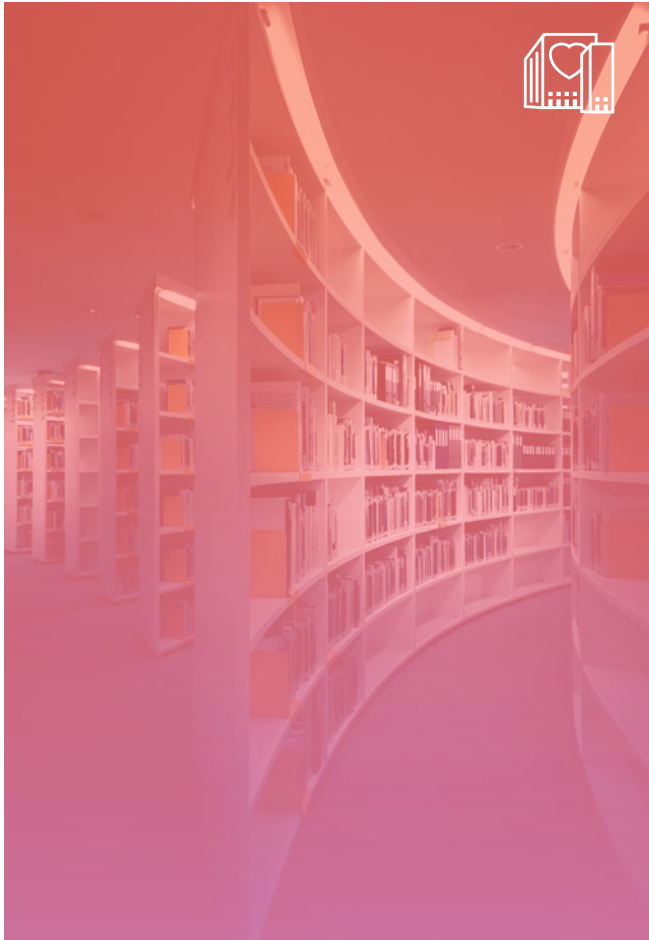
“Maybe we should see the input of a partner as *sweat equity*, and that she should therefore be rewarded with shares for her work. Before the man brings in external investors, it wouldn’t be that hard to say that ownership of the company is to be shared with the woman.”

- ▶ **WHAT IS AN** investment?
- ▶ **CAN AN INVESTMENT** be passive and unconscious (like the purchase of a family car), or must it be active and consciously support the entrepreneur and the company?
- ▶ **HOW CAN WE MAKE** investments create equality?
- ▶ **HOW CAN WE ULTIMATELY** guarantee that growth helps to create equality?
- ▶ **IF WE WANT** to achieve equality, how does it affect how we work with external investments in the company? Can prenuptial and shareholder agreements protect investors while supporting equality?
- ▶ **IF INNOVATION-SUPPORT SYSTEM** people like us are also to work for equality in the home, how can we learn more about the mutual influence between family and entrepreneurship?

” Sure, I don’t work as much. But it means I get a worse pension and all that. Because that’s what happens when you’ve taken a lot of time off looking after sick kids and not been working a hundred per cent.”

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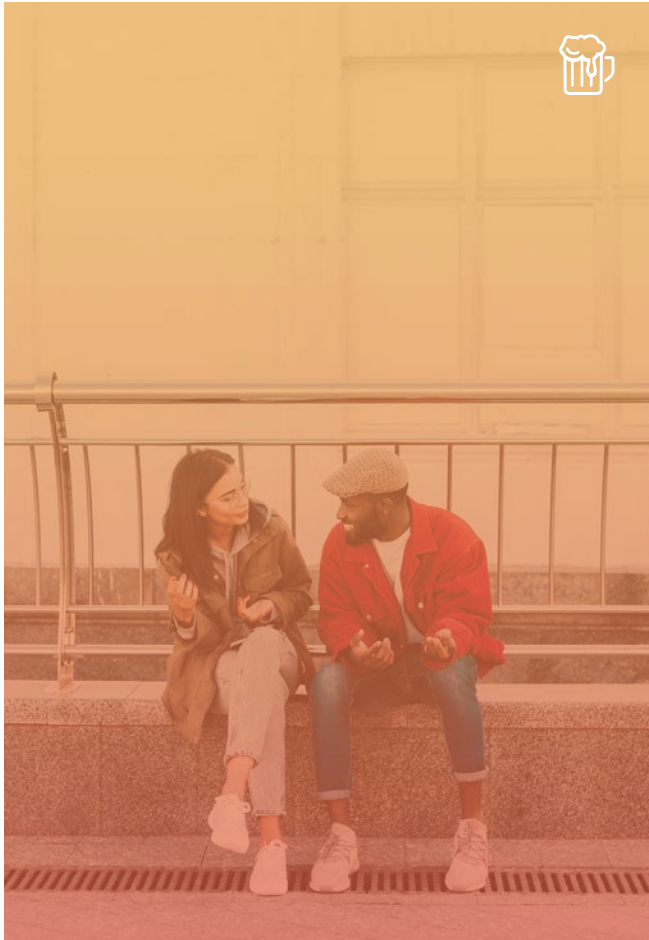


## FAILED TO CRACK THE CODE

Magnus Klofsten is professor of innovation and entrepreneurship at Linköping University. He argues that contemporary research has abandoned the idea that an entrepreneur necessarily has certain personality characteristics. Nowadays, the research looks at individual behaviour, since entrepreneurship is a process.

“The process contains a whole load of different parts, one of which is the team. The team is the people around the entrepreneur whom you have to engage for the entrepreneurship to succeed. It could be the wife, the kids – anyone actually. They’re also part of the process and thus also part of the entrepreneurship.”

When Klofsten graduated with his PhD in 1992, it was with “some kind of entrepreneurship thesis”, as he puts it. Later that year, he helped to set up the university’s entrepreneurship programme in response to the almost non-existent



support for those who had ideas and hopes of starting a business.

However, before that, in the mid-1980s, Magnus Klofsten and Uno Alfredéen (entrepreneur, business-builder and honorary doctor of engineering at Linköping University) had already launched a training programme for entrepreneurs whose companies had grown out of research done at Linköping University. The idea behind it was that business executives needed highly competent sparring partners to deal more effectively with key issues of growth and development.

” From the first day of the entrepreneurship programme, we stuck to a particular philosophy – to put the individual before the idea, because there are no bad ideas. It’s the individual who shapes and develops the ideas into something of value. And the ideas and the individuals are both influenced by the context, by customers, family and friends. I can cite all sorts of situations in which we didn’t at first think anything would come of an idea, and yet in the end it did.”

Another fundamental principle was that the entrepreneurship programme needed to exist in a context. It could not have the right effect on its own and needed to be surrounded by incubators and science parks and be part of the larger system. It needed, in other words, what modern research calls a “team”.

In spite of the immense contribution that Klofsten has made to entrepreneurship and the creation of entrepreneurs,

there is one thing that still grieves him, and if you raise the subject, you can hear how frustrated the researcher in him becomes.

“We never managed to crack the equality code. We really wanted to solve it but we never got the feedback in the systems that would give us the tools to do it.”

What he means is that the lack of equality remained, immune to whatever they tried to do.

“When you start to discuss different suggestions for how to put things right ...” Magnus Klofsten sighs and falls silent before starting again. “The lack of equality has been discussed for decades. I’ve tried to do it myself. I’ve been sitting next to gender studies people and am surprised at how we still lack the tools to fix things. Everyone just works away in their own little boxes. I think one reason is they’re too timid. Because if you’re outspoken, you have to be able to take the discussion, in which case it’s easier to hide behind a policy.”



## WHAT STORY DO WE WANT TO TELL?

For a story to be a story, you need certain ingredients. You need a plot and one or more scenes for it to play out on, and you need at least one character to follow.

Stories normally also have a given outcome, an end, which means that every time you read the book or see the film, it is the same. Characters, scenes and plots are identical to what they were last time and the story concludes as it always has done.

Another characteristic is that stories gradually gain collective significance. This means that you, I and everyone else who is party to them – consciously or unconsciously – agree on what they represent and how they are to be interpreted.

If, for example, we listen to the story of an entrepreneurship, the main character is the entrepreneur himself (or herself). The scene on which everything plays out is the



company. The narrative is driven by the plot, which is about creating financial growth, societal prosperity and global development.

Just like equality is much, much more than equal gender distribution, there is often much more behind even the simplest of stories. This is also true of the story of the entrepreneur.

## **SINGLE, YET MULTIPLE**

David Boje is an author and professor of storytelling. He argues that there are many perspectives to all the narratives we live and pass on. To illustrate his point, he cites *Tamara*, a play by John Krizanc.

*Tamara* plays out over a number of scenes and spaces. But instead of audiences sitting passively in their chairs, they are able to roam freely, either following a character and watching how he or she moves through the play, or linger at one of the play's many scenes to watch things unfold there. Depending on what you choose to do, your experience will differ from other people's.

Since the play is full of parallel activities, it is impossible to see it enough times to explore all situations and outcomes. If you tried to witness all possible permutations, in succession and without a break, it would take you about 140 years.

*Tamara* was conceived to show the diversity of characters, storylines and scenes that can make up a narrative.

Other narratives also contain many more storylines, scenes and characters than those we hear about. If we always

follow the same character and get the same perspective, we will never understand how varied a story really is. If, on the other hand, we deliberately explore the different characters, scenes and storylines, we will reap a better understanding of the whole and its complexity.

- ▶ **WHAT STORY DO WE** tell about the entrepreneur?
- ▶ **WHAT STORY ABOUT EQUALITY** is important to us, and what does it mean?
- ▶ **HOW DIFFERENT ARE THE STORIES** that the government, the innovation system, you and I hear and tell others?



## THE NORMATIVE STORIES

Inspired by Boje, Matilda Eriksson writes that a possible way of describing different types of story and perspective is to talk about *normative* and *parallel* stories. The normative stories are those we see as true, while the parallel stories challenge, complement and problematise them.

The normative stories are far from neutral. They shape the way we see ourselves and the society in which we live. They control our behaviour and influence how we relate to others. Characters, stages and plots that do *not* form part of the normative story are considered aberrant and hard to understand.

A normative story therefore dictates the conditions of truth. But the fact that they can easily become synonymous with the truth can be a problem, because it is often from them that we draw new knowledge and truths – which risk exacerbating the imbalance. The truth sustains itself like a player-piano, regardless of whether the story is created by a person or as part of a company or national PR strategy.

We shall soon give examples of how easily one-sided stories become synonymous with the truth and show how people have spoken about the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship over the years.

After that, we will follow Matilda Eriksson as she works on her doctoral thesis, and learn how the innovation-support system reacts when she goes to foreground the invisible people surrounding the entrepreneurs.





## DECEPTIVE SIMPLICITY IS MISGUIDING

Though how hard can it be to understand that one single story can never be explained by such words as *answer* or *truth*? Very hard, it turns out.

For decades, comedians around the world – from Bill Hicks to Johan Glans – have made fun of normative stories, such as the traditions we take for granted and pass on to the next generation without a second thought.

Imagine that you work for the Church of Sweden. It is what you do, here and now. Your job is to make people understand the sanctity of Easter. Because evidently no one has celebrated – ever – the greatest day in the ecclesiastical calendar, when Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead.

After having spent some time thinking hard about it, you believe that you have arrived at the best way of celebrating these events. Naturally, we are to commemorate the crucifixion and resurrection with a bunny that hops around hiding chocolate eggs. In church, we must eat dry wafers and drink non-alcoholic wine. And if the kids want, they can dress up as witches, knock on strangers' doors, give away sloppily executed drawings and beg for sweets.

It is easy to laugh at this example, but there are many normative stories today that are worth re-visiting with fresh eyes. One of them is how we in the innovation-support system are to work with and promote enterprise in relation to equality.

“ Our plan is to spend our lives together. But it’d be a real bummer if he suddenly decides he doesn’t want to live with me any more. We’ve invested so much of our time in this project, so if it happened I’d get nothing out of it, financially speaking.”

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## THE GREAT MAN

The word “entrepreneur” comes from the French phrasal verb *entre prendre*, which can be translated as *undertake something*.

This is, of course, a broad definition that raises more questions. Who is it doing the undertaking? What is to be undertaken? Why is it to be undertaken?

Thanks to his book, *The Theory of Economic Development* (1934), Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter has been called the founder of entrepreneurship research. He often said that the entrepreneur’s struggle is a heavy and arduous one, for the very act of trying to create something new threatens established actors and they will hit back.

When Schumpeter spoke of the entrepreneur it was in terms of *the Great Man*, a super-human who single-handedly defied existing structures. A man with ambition who dared to dream of new means of achieving economic growth and building a better world.

Barely seventy years on (2003), the European Commission published its *Green Paper on Entrepreneurship in Europe*, a discussion document intended to galvanise entrepreneurship in the EU and produce more entrepreneurs. It eventually became something that would set the agenda for how member states would henceforth work with the issue.

The cover of the green paper is dominated by a middle-aged white man. He is dressed in a light suit, a white shirt and a tie, and he is holding a briefcase. He is neither slim nor overweight. He is wearing a relaxed smile and walking purposefully towards the camera.

What Schumpeter and the EU Green Paper have in common is that their stories overlap each other. They have the same characters, stages and plots.

Over the years, other scholars have continued along the same lines and described the entrepreneur in such terms as *the keyman*, *the man who organizes the firm and increases its productive capacity* and *the hero who perceives gaps and connects markets*.

In books, entrepreneurship has largely been associated with words that evoke the image of a man, one that goes hand in hand with masculinity rather than femininity (Ahl, 2002, and Berglund, 2007). The entrepreneur is described as flexible, someone who accepts ambiguities and uncertainties, a leader, a result-orientated person who takes initiatives. The entrepreneur has money as a measure of success. The entrepreneur is bold, influential, resolute, self-centred and seeks out power and problems.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the gender literature started to critically comment on how women who ran companies were portrayed as the other in relation to male entrepreneurs. The other was associated with words such as inflexible, insecure and aimless, with ignorance, gullibility and impressionability. The other is wishy-washy, indecisive, passive and self-sacrificing, a short-sighted, dependent soul who avoids the cut and thrust of the business world.



## MORE THAN TWO PERSPECTIVES

What the normative story teaches us about entrepreneurship is that it primarily defines the entrepreneur as masculine – rather than feminine.

When we study equality in relation to entrepreneurship, we find a great deal of data on women who run companies. But this is also the point. Because there are many more perspectives. When it comes to equality and entrepreneurship, the discussion seems to be almost completely dominated by the focus on women who run companies and on encouraging more women to run companies. This clearly illustrates the blind spot we have about how we actually work towards our equality goals.

Matilda Eriksson says that women and their companies are often studied

- from a feminist and/or gender-related perspective on a broad front with varying entry points (Henry et al., 2016)
- within parts of the public sector that have been privatised (Brodin and Peterson, 2017)
- in relation to the family (Javefors Grauers, 2000, Ahl and Nelson, 2015)

- in relation to geographical location (Bernhard and Olsson, 2020)
- in rural areas (Pettersson and Cassel, 2014)
- in relation to gender, power and industry (Sköld and Tillmar, 2015)
- in relation to being a migrant or refugee (Webster and Haandrikman, 2017, Lazarczyk-Bilal and Glinka, 2020)
- in relation to economic growth (Sarfaraz et al., 2014).

Matilda says that the willingness to understand and visibilise the life of the female entrepreneur is considerable. The same is true of the attempts of policy to improve and bolster her situation in relation to the enterprising man.

Although that's just it. When we talk about the entrepreneur, we often see the person as male. And when we address equality and women's situation we do so from the vantage point of women who run companies. At the same time, we've forgotten the dimensions that Matilda Eriksson's research turns the spotlight on. That invisible participation, that there are so many more voices we don't hear or know anything about.



- ▶ **WHAT WORDS** do we use when describing entrepreneurs, incubators and science parks?
- ▶ **ARE THE WORDS** we use more often associated with male or female characteristics and traits? Does it matter?
- ▶ **DO WE MORE OFTEN** describe the mechanical and technical aspects of the innovation-support system, or do we rather talk about human relationships and soft values? What does this tell us?

”

That's a bit of a sensitive point. Because he really wants to be all equal and everything, and considers himself very modern. But we're not so equal as we'd like to be. Our life together centres on him and his company.”

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PARTNER OF AN ENTREPRENEUR

## THE PARALLEL STORIES

If we are interested in more fully understanding the whole – and not getting bogged down in details or hooked up on simplified truths – we will need to find other stories and perspectives. This applies as much to entrepreneurship and equality as it does to how we celebrate Easter.

We must look beyond the arranged stories that are created to suit a certain context and purpose. When we learn to find and recognise the contours of the normative stories, we also start to see what is hiding in their shadows. Only then can we begin to listen to the people who are rarely given a voice.

The parallel stories are based on everyday, individual experiences. They are often multifaceted, ambiguous and contradictory and show how people are influenced by the normative stories and at whose expense such stories exist.

While the normative story claims to be a *collective truth*, the parallel stories reveal our *collective interpretive gap*.

Parallel stories surrounding the entrepreneur can, for example, be told by the entrepreneur's children, parents or other people close to him/her (the entrepreneur). They can be told by people who, despite living side-by-side with the entrepreneur, have a different view of reality.

Because just like in *Tamara*, life is acted out on many stages – simultaneously – and has an almost infinite number of plots and characters. It is a play of which we all, in one way or another, write the storyline.

And no matter how many parallel stories we listen to, there are always more blind spots.

Even if we are focusing on the man as entrepreneur and the woman as partner in this book, there are also many men living with an entrepreneurial woman. Part of the reason why we have not read so much about them is that the focus of the entrepreneurship literature has always been the *woman as life-partner* and *man as entrepreneur*. Which means there should be invisible men who are part of the parallel stories and who contribute to the entrepreneurship behind the scenes

- ▶ **WHAT STORY** about the entrepreneur do you yourself have? What parallel stories do you think there might be?
- ▶ **WHO WOULD** you say participates in the entrepreneurship?
- ▶ **IS THE SUPPORT** we give the entrepreneur always compatible with improving equality? If not, why not? What can you yourself change? What should be changed at system level?

## WHICH MARRIAGES SHALL WE WRECK?

So what happens to the normative story about the entrepreneur when it is challenged? Surely the innovation-support system is equipped to deal with the parallel stories, isn't it? The following are stories from the diary Matilda Eriksson kept as she worked on her thesis on business administration – the thesis upon which this book is based.

When Matilda Eriksson was looking for people to interview for her thesis, she started off via her network. At the time she was working at Västerås Science Park, where there were lots of entrepreneurs whose partners were of potential relevance to her study.

Matilda asked her ten colleagues if they knew any women whom she could usefully interview. Five of them said that they would be happy to help her find people. Other colleagues turned her down on the spot.

One of the vacillators was a man and former entrepreneur,

who said that he might help her out. “But it depends which marriages we’re going to wreck.” He asked for some time to think it over. He later decided not to help her as he considered the area too sensitive.

“Would it have been as sensitive if the relationship had been the other way round?” asked Matilda. “I mean, if the woman had been the entrepreneur and I’d asked you to contact her partner, the man?”

“Pfff. Strange as it might sound, I wouldn’t have considered that to be as sensitive.”

Another colleague at Västerås Science Park, an experienced entrepreneur himself, was well-disposed towards and knowledgeable about Matilda Eriksson’s research. Since he was also one of her earlier mediators of contacts, she arranged a meeting with him to ask his advice on how to find potential interviewees.

Hardly had they sat down before a person passed by the meeting room’s glass door. It was one of the entrepreneurs on Matilda’s list of people whose partner she wanted to interview.

“Go and do your thing on him,” said the colleague, just before the entrepreneur popped his head round the door to say hello.

Matilda introduced herself and told him about her research. She said that she was interested in talking to the partners of entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneur smiled and nodded with interest.

When Matilda explained that it was about studying women’s experiences of living with entrepreneurs something

happened. The man's smile dropped and he took a barely perceptible step back.

"Can I get your contact details?" he asked. "I'll check things with my girlfriend and get back to you."

After the entrepreneur had closed the door and gone on his way, Matilda's colleague turned to her. "Did you notice what happened? He was all for it until you said you wanted to talk to his girlfriend. In his world, you wanting to sound her out about entrepreneurship is a potential threat. You have to make him feel like a king ... and make it look like his girlfriend helps him with the incredibly important work he does with his company."





## ENTREPRENEURSHIP BEFORE CHILDREN

The months passed and Matilda continued composing her thesis. The next time she approached the entrepreneurs left on her list, she did so with a revised request, reformulated to make them accept: *to study how people in relationships cooperate in order to enable entrepreneurship.*

Even though she asked every entrepreneur individually, their reactions were all very similar. They often began with a chuckle of recognition and a comment that somehow stressed the importance of the research field.

When Matilda explained in her next breath that it was the entrepreneurs' partners she wanted to talk to, the tone of their reactions started to diverge. Some of them instantly refused to drag their partner into something like that, others said they would talk to their partner and get back to her.

- ▶ **TWO ENTREPRENEURSR** were quite open about not wanting to get their partner involved.
- ▶ **THREE ENTREPRENEURS** did not answer at all, despite being sent reminders.
- ▶ **FIVE ENTREPRENEURS** forwarded Matilda's contact details to the partner.

One of the entrepreneurs said that he was genuinely interested in her research and the subject and that he himself felt a need to discuss it.

The man was somewhere between 40 and 50 and lived with his spouse and two small children. He said that he had been thinking about entrepreneurship in relation to the family for many years and that he sometimes asked other entrepreneurs about their own lives in order to help him get a better understanding of the issue.

He explained that he was unlike other entrepreneurs in that he did not talk about his work at home. This he did to spare his spouse, since he had already had a partner who "couldn't take the entrepreneurial pressure," as he put it. He said that it was difficult for women to grasp how arduous entrepreneurship could be – for the entrepreneur.

” My wife's got to understand that I can't take the kids at night. If I've worked until late in the evening and have to get up early the next morning for a meeting in another town, it's just not going to happen. It's impossible to be on the ball if the night before I've been changing nappies and dealing with crying babies and only got a couple of hours' sleep. Those things have to work. Despite this we have recurring discussions about it. I've explained to her time and again but it's no good.”

*A few days later, the man sent a text.*

”Hi Matilda.

Sorry. I was in a meeting until late. I’ve thought about things a lot but still don’t know what to think. I’ve mentioned the interview at home to her in passing, and in any event she didn’t say no, but for domestic reasons we haven’t gone into any more detail about it. The time’s not been right, if I can put it like that ...

Your research is super-important and I’m sure you got that I’ve put a lot of thought into these issues myself. At the same time, if you’re to do a probing analysis with such a small group as ten people, the interview objects should be selected with care so as not to bias the results.

I’m not 100% sure that my wife is the right person for this, for several reasons. Besides, ironically enough, we’re having a rather infected debate about this very issue. So I

think, to be honest, that an interview might stir things up between us on the personal front and will probably distort your results. So at the moment this just isn’t the right time.

If it’s to happen, it’ll have to be at a later date. We have two young children and I must prioritise some form of stability at home for their sake. There isn’t any at the moment and an interview risks becoming a weapon in the debate, with misleading results as a consequence.

To be completely frank, I also don’t think she’s the right person for an interview. I can explain if we ever talk about it. But anyway, right now it just isn’t a good time.

I hope you understand. We can talk on the phone one day if you want to know more. I don’t know your schedule and when you need to get your interviews done. So I’m not saying no, just not yet.

Have a nice evening!”



## CONSTANT FRUSTRATION

The trouble with normative stories is not only that they easily become synonymous with the truth; inherent to them is a resistance to new angles of approach and perspectives. For them to remain true, all other stories must remain either false or invisible.

In a sense, the normative and parallel stories are in symbiosis, living side by side in a close, interdependent relationship. Or might parasitism be more apt, given that one benefits more clearly from the relationship than the other?

Back to Matilda Eriksson.

Her work progressed. Her thesis grew – as did her frustration. She wanted to interview more women living with entrepreneurs, but to get to them she always had to go through the entrepreneur. So she turned to a colleague who had previously opened up their network to her.

*Matilda:* “If I told you I wanted to contact the woman direct, without going via the entrepreneur, what would you say?”

*Colleague 1:* “I wouldn’t be comfortable with that.”

*Matilda:* “No?”

*Colleague 1:* “Not at all, actually.”

*Matilda:* “Why not?”

*Colleague 1:* “Good question. I don’t know. Before you asked me I’d never given it any thought.”



*Matilda:* “Does this mean that you think the man has the right to decide whether or not the woman can take part in a study?”

*Colleague 1:* “It sounds totally off the wall when you put it like that. Of course I don’t think that. But at the same time, it’d feel weird to me if you got in touch with the partner of an entrepreneur who I know and am friends with without talking to him first.”

*Matilda:* “You mean I would then go behind their backs?”

*Colleague 1:* “Something along those line, yes.”

*Matilda:* “Most of these companies are on our website, so it’s no secret who they are. And the details can be found elsewhere on the net.”

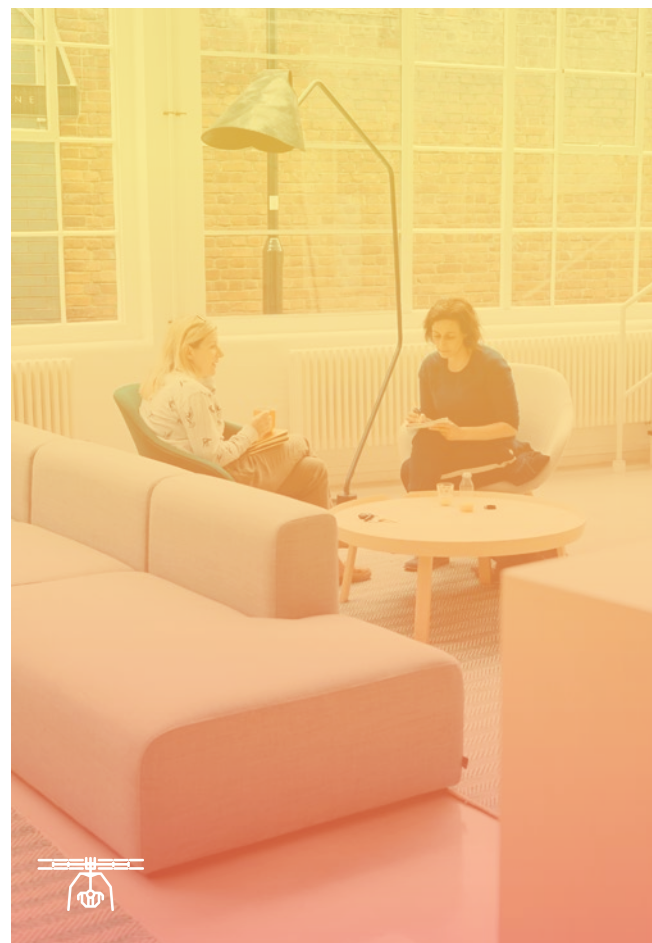
*Colleague 1:* “Yeah, I know. But it still feels a bit wrong, I just can’t quite put my finger on why. Our work depends on maintaining good relations with these companies.”

*Matilda:* ““And contacting their partners would sour these relations?”

*Colleague 1:* “This issue can be a really sensitive one for many people, we both know that.”

*Matilda:* “So if I contact people you don’t know or have a relationship with, would that feel more acceptable?”

*Colleague 1:* “It’d feel more OK, yeah. Pah, what the hell. Go for it! If there’s a problem, we’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”





## SUDDENLY A MANAGEMENT ISSUE

To make more progress, Matilda asks another colleague for help.

*Matilda:* “I’d like to make direct contact with the women instead of having to go through the entrepreneurs.”

*Colleague 2:* “Why?”

*Matilda:* “I’ve had trouble reaching them, as in some cases the entrepreneur refuses from the off. In others, he doesn’t get back to me after saying he’ll talk to his partner first.”

*Colleague 2:* “Are you talking about companies attached to us? I can help you give them a nudge, if you like.”

*Matilda:* “I wouldn’t say specifically them. But it’d be valuable to get in direct touch with the women myself instead of us talking with the companies first.”

*Colleague 2:* “I don’t know about this. As you know, we’ve signed project agreements with the companies in which they undertake to do certain things while they can also expect certain things from us. A researcher going in and talking to their partners isn’t in the agreement. It can be a bit sensitive.”

*Matilda:* “But in that case it means that we’re giving the entrepreneur the right to decide whether or not his partner can take part in a study. Where’s the equality in that?”



*Colleague 2 (with a laugh):* “You’re right, in that sense it isn’t particularly equal. No but anyway. Such matters can be sensitive and we don’t have a contractual right to work with them. If you want to get in touch with the women direct, I’d have to get the approval of the management.”

*Matilda:* “I understand that it can be sensitive. But I think it’s interesting that you make me wanting to talk to women direct a managerial matter to decide. It wasn’t when I *just* wanted to contact the entrepreneurs. The fact that I’m a researcher involved in this science park project pretty much stymies all my chances of getting in touch with the women. Because if I hadn’t been, and just been any old researcher, I’d have been able to get their details from the net without having to ask your permission or that of the entrepreneurs beforehand.”

*Colleague 2:* “Not all of them.”

*Matilda:* “As good as.”



*Colleague 2:* “Yeah, sure, I guess so. But still, I’m not comfortable about you using me and my name when you contact the women.”

*Matilda:* “Why not?”

*Colleague 2:* “It’s about business relations and trust. Giving me as a reference when talking to them somehow means I’m vouching for you and your research. But one option is to contact my colleague at the other incubator, a terrific person with a vast network who’s been helping to grow companies for years.”

*Matilda:* “You mean it’d be more OK with this person?”

*Colleague 2:* “Yes, I think she’s a really easy person to deal with. And I’m sure she’ll be able to relate to your questions. She knows many entrepreneurs privately and no doubt can supply you with a couple of direct contacts to women.”



So to sum up: For Matilda to talk to one woman required the permission of two men.



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When we had our second child, he signed up for running the company.

So we had two babies at home and it was up to me to take care of them because we knew he wouldn't be able to do it in the same way. He was at home for a month in the summer, and that was a huge deal.”

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PARTNER OF AN ENTREPRENEUR

## WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

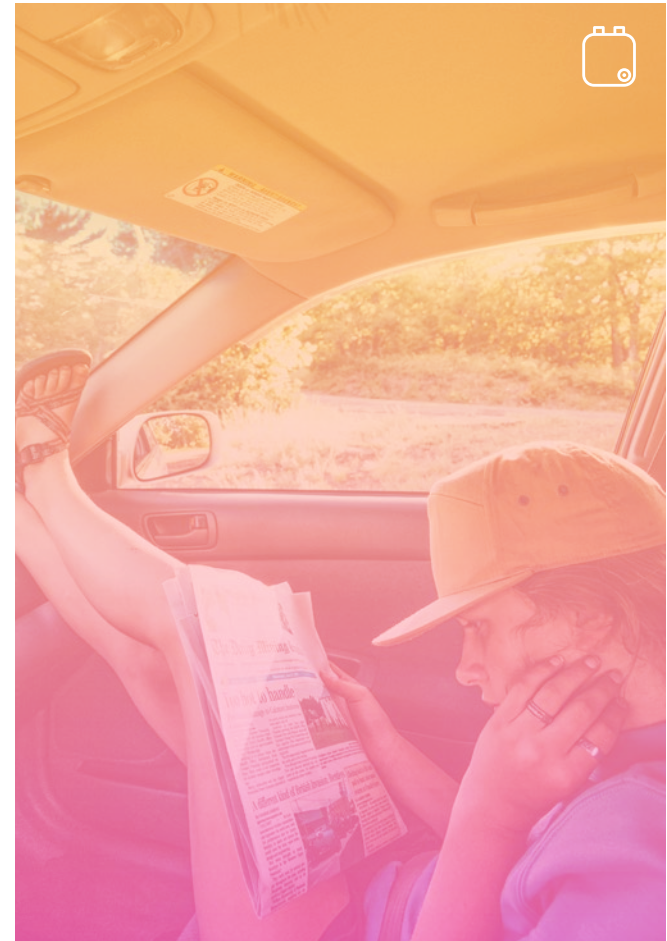
Just how hard it can be to handle issues of equality is evident from Bourne's 2010 study of the Swedish welfare system, in which she concludes that policies intended to close the gap between men and women just widen it instead.

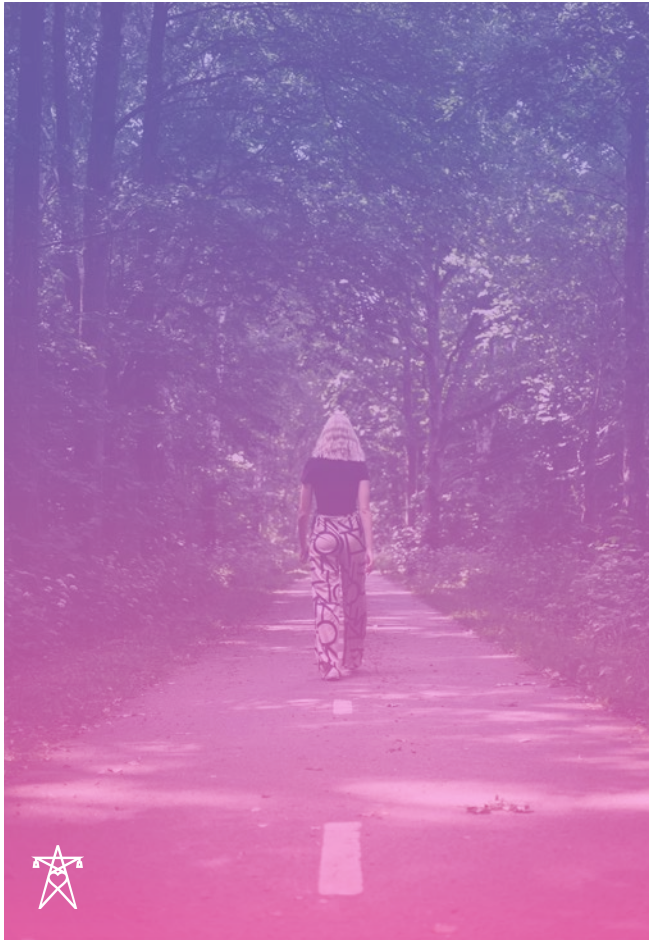
She also writes that the welfare state, which is meant to be founded upon equality, tends to reproduce the power relations between women and men within the structure of the labour market. This, in turn, means that current policy helps to perpetuate the male norm in society by keeping women subjugated (Pettersson, 2007, 2012).

To make headway in this, we can critically interrogate the conceptions we take for granted and look at the normative story to find the parallel ones.

The next time you read a policy text, for example, discuss how your work group is to collaborate, word a project application or access a conference programme, be alert to and think about the following questions:

- ▶ **HOW IS THE PROBLEM** that the policy is designed to solve actually described? Whether we are aware of it or not, we will steer the solution in accordance with how we formulate the problem that we think we have identified.
- ▶ **WHAT KNOWLEDGE** and experience do we assume? Which story do we take to be truer than any other, and why?
- ▶ **WHAT DO WE** take to be so self-evident that we do not even give it any thought? What are we not questioning? Is it, for example, obvious that entrepreneurship is being practised by an individual or a collective? Does entrepreneurship occur in the public realm or the private?
- ▶ **IS IT CLEAR** who will be excluded by the solution and in what way?





## THE WAY AHEAD

Yes, companies are better placed to succeed if the entrepreneur is married and has a stable family situation. Yes, it matters that there is invisible capital and invisible domestic labour to support the upstart years. Yes, the partner's experience and network contributes to commercial success.

In spite of this, we tend to deny the partner access to capital gains and shares in the company. We also have an invisible partner who risks sabotaging her pension since she's been at home with the children and taken time off to care for them during her husband's entrepreneurial years.

And that's not all. The cases discussed by Matilda Eriksson in her thesis also show that we often deny women the right to their own voices. Matilda had difficulties even reaching out to women to hear their views on what it is like to live with an entrepreneur. How equal is that? Sometimes even the innovation system's business coaches declined to ask the entrepreneur the question to avoid creating an awkward atmosphere.

Everything about the way we support entrepreneurs and startup innovation companies is in direct conflict with how we have defined Sweden's equality objectives, the aim of which is for women and men to have the same financial premisses for work of equal value – both at work and in the home.

Now that you've read this book you'll see things through the lens of equality and the invisible will hopefully become visible. At which point it should be hard to return unconsciously to business as usual.

It's now up to us to find new paths and work with the issue with greater awareness and reflection. The question is: How can we do it? What do *you* want to do?

Get in touch!

**LENA MIRANDA**, CEO of Linköping Science Park

