Spotlight
by CeFEO

Can running a business help mothers rewrite the rules of parenting?

Redefining motherhood through entrepreneurship in Sweden

MAGDALENA MARKOWSKA · HELENE AHL · LUCIA NALDI

Published on April 27, 2025 *https://doi.org/10.68623/spotlight.2025.4z1*

Family business leaders know that the family and the firm are inseparable. But for women, the balance often comes with added weight. In many societies, motherhood still carries the expectation of selflessness, presence, and priority over everything else—including career. Meanwhile, entrepreneurship demands long hours, passion, and commitment. The clash between these expectations has created what scholars call a **double bind**: mothers who also lead businesses are expected to be both endlessly available at home and tireless entrepreneurs at work .

The study at the heart of this article asks: **how do women entrepreneurs in Sweden navigate this double bind?** Sweden is particularly relevant, as it combines strong welfare policies (parental leave, subsidized daycare, individual taxation) with a cultural commitment to gender equality . Yet even here, mothers still feel the pull of "intensive parenting" norms, where maternal presence is seen as the ultimate marker of a good parent .

For family businesses, these findings are more than theoretical. They provide a glimpse into how entrepreneurial mothers craft their roles in ways that strengthen both their families and their ventures—lessons that apply well beyond Sweden.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The research draws on **45 life-story interviews with 15 Swedish women entrepreneurs** who became business owners while raising young children. These women came from diverse sectors: fashion, food, jewelry, design, marketing, and more (see Table 1 in the article). Most were married or cohabiting, middle-class, and well-educated.

The life-story method gave space for the women to narrate their own experiences, blending professional ambitions with family realities. Interviews were conducted three times over three years, allowing researchers to trace how their views on motherhood evolved .

Using **thematic analysis**, the researchers identified patterns in how these women constructed their identities as both mothers and entrepreneurs. Two strategies stood out:

- **Coalescing** – blending the maternal and professional selves.
- **Gender abating** – stripping motherhood of its gendered expectations and reframing it as shared parenthood.

These strategies reveal how entrepreneurship can be not only a career path but also a platform for **reshaping cultural norms of family life**.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Navigating Between Ideal, Actual, and Normative Motherhood

For many participants, motherhood meant juggling three overlapping "selves":

- **Ideal motherhood** – the dream of being present and nurturing.
- **Normative motherhood** – the socially expected, often self-sacrificing, mother.

- **Actual motherhood** – their lived experience of balancing children, work, and personal fulfillment .

Take **Katarina**, a granola maker. She imagined motherhood as keeping her children close, much like her farm upbringing. Yet she also longed for personal growth and professional projects. Her motherhood became not just about caregiving but about *birthing her own ideas*. Similarly, **Sofia**, a jeweler, rejected the "baby activity" culture expected of new mothers, instead sharing parental leave with her partner so she could continue developing her business.

These narratives show a subtle but powerful shift: **being a good mother was not about constant presence, but about authenticity and fulfillment**.

2. Coalescing: Blending Work and Family

Rather than separating family and business, many women **wove them together**. Entrepreneurship became an extension of motherhood, not its competitor.

- **Charlotta**, a fashion entrepreneur, emphasized *quality over quantity*: "When you are with your kids, just focus on them." Her point was that being fully present during family time mattered more than being present all the time.
- **Frida**, a media sales professional, worked extensively during her second maternity leave but argued that doing so made her a better mother: "Without a happy mother, there will be no happy child."
- **Moa**, a designer, viewed her parental leave as a chance to throw herself into her venture: "I was overjoyed because now I could work full-time with this project."

This **coalescing** strategy reframes motherhood as compatible with entrepreneurship. The women did not see themselves as sacrificing one role for the other, but as integrating them into a fuller identity.

3. Gender Abating: From Mother to Parent

Perhaps the most radical insight was the insistence that *"my child has two parents."*

Women deliberately pushed back against the assumption that mothers must shoulder the majority of care. For example:

- **Helena**, a marketing professional, quickly returned to work while her husband stayed home with their children. She stated bluntly: "I am a feminist. We must downsize the importance of a mother. It is parenting that matters."
- **Frida** questioned everyday expectations: "Why is it always me who should stay home when my child is sick or take them to the dentist? Their father can do it equally well."
- **Linnea**, a vegan baby-food entrepreneur, disliked being told to "think like a mother." Her response was firm: "I am a parent, and my child has two parents."

By **abating gendered expectations**, these women normalized shared responsibility, aligning their practices with Sweden's dual-earner cultural model. This shift reduced guilt, empowered their ventures, and modeled equality for their children.

4. Entrepreneurship as a Vehicle for the Self

For many participants, their ventures were more than businesses—they were **personal projects of identity and meaning**.

- **Zoe**, a children's clothing entrepreneur, built her company around gender-neutral clothing to undo stereotypical color norms. Her business became a feminist statement as well as a commercial venture.
- **Lisa**, who created a maternity sportswear brand, connected her business to her traumatic childbirth experience. She partnered with charities to support safe deliveries in developing countries, turning her business into a vehicle for social change.
- **Fanny**, an ice-cream maker, described how entrepreneurship made her "more self-secure" and a happier parent.

The repeated metaphor of the "business as a baby" appeared often. These ventures were not side projects but deeply integrated into the women's sense of who they were and what kind of mothers they wanted to be.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESSES

1. Equal Parenting Strengthens Family Firms

When both parents share caregiving, mothers can invest in entrepreneurship without guilt. Family businesses thrive when leadership is not constrained by gendered parenting roles.

2. Entrepreneurship Is More Than Work

For women, entrepreneurship is often an identity project. Family firms should recognize and support

this deeper motivation, which sustains resilience and long-term vision.

3. Context Matters

Sweden's welfare system enabled these women to reimagine motherhood. In contexts without such support, the burden falls more heavily on individual families. This highlights the importance of aligning **policy, culture, and family business practices**.

IMPACT

This study disrupts the cultural script of the "self-sacrificing mother." Instead, it introduces a new discourse: **the fulfilled, balanced, role-model mother**.

For family businesses, this matters because:

- It validates women's leadership within entrepreneurial families.
- It demonstrates that **parenthood does not have to conflict with entrepreneurship**—it can enrich it.
- It suggests that future generations may grow up with broader role models of what mothers and fathers can be.

By coalescing work and family, and by abating gendered expectations, these women show that motherhood itself can evolve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **For Family Business Leaders**: Normalize co-parenting practices within entrepreneurial families. Encourage fathers' visible participation in both childcare and business.
- **For Policymakers**: Recognize that welfare policies are also entrepreneurship policies. Affordable childcare and parental leave unlock women's potential as business creators.
- **For Researchers**: Extend this inquiry to other contexts—what happens in countries without Sweden's egalitarian system? How do single mothers navigate entrepreneurship? What lessons can global family firms draw?

Spotlight by CeFEO, Can running a business help mothers rewrite the rules of parenting? Redefining motherhood through entrepreneurship in Sweden. Downloaded on 19 November 2026 from https://doi.org/10.68623/spotlight.2025.4z1

CEFEO AUTHORS



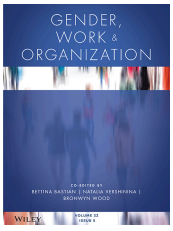
Lucia Naldi

Professor

Jönköping International Business School

lucia.naldi@ju.se

PUBLISHED IN



Markowska, M., Ahl, H., & Naldi, L. (2025). "My Child Has Two Parents": Swedish Women Entrepreneurs Doing and Undoing Their Motherhood. Gender, Work & Organization.

https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13272

Spotlight is an online magazine that translates research from the Centre for Family Entrepreneurship and Ownership (CeFEO) at Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University, into accessible insights for family business owners, practitioners, and policymakers.

Spotlight is supported by the WIFU Foundation. This partnership advances dialogue and education in responsible family entrepreneurship and ownership.


JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
Jönköping International
Business School
CeFEO
Centre for Family
Entrepreneurship
and Ownership


WIFU
FOUNDATION