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Gender Barriers Facing Female Entrepreneurs In Switzerland

Zürich, Switzerland

From December 27th, 2014 to January 10th, 2015, I interviewed male and female entrepreneurs in the Swiss canton of Zürich. My interview questions focused on the number of employees that male- and female-founded Swiss businesses hired and differences in business output as measured by profit, internationalization, and other factors of growth. Responses to these interview questions shed light on my research question - What barriers do female Swiss entrepreneurs face despite enjoying near perfect gender equality in the Swiss entrepreneurship space? My hypothesis was that Swiss women were less inclined to pursue high-risk business opportunities than men. After my time in Zürich, however, my hypothesis was proven wrong.

According to the male and female entrepreneurs I interviewed, the two leading causes of male-founded Swiss businesses outperforming female-founded Swiss businesses are the male-dominated technology sector and the male drive to internationalize. First, the Swiss technology sector is at any time made up of 70% to 85% male founders and employees. Because tech is one of the largest Swiss industries and the fastest-growing with regard to new businesses and patents, male founders are by nature more likely to experience rapid business growth when compared to female founders who predominantly operate outside of the technology space. Second, my interviewees introduced me to studies and gave personal anecdotes about male-founded businesses being much more likely to internationalize than female-founded businesses. In essence, I learned that because men who start businesses in Switzerland are more likely to spread their business outside of Switzerland than are women, men are by virtue more likely to start businesses that outperform women because they reach a broader, international market.

While discovering these two leading causes through one-on-one interviews, I learned much about myself and how I communicate. I was surprised by how quickly my structured interviews turned into insightful conversations when I went “off-script” and followed each pre-planned interview question with one or two questions that came to mind in the moment. Because of this, I treasure my time with the entrepreneurs whom I interviewed the most out of all of my experiences in Zürich. I loved building relationships with Swiss entrepreneurs while at the same time gaining insight into my research question.

To my peers who are considering applying for research grants or are interested in gender and economics, I say “visit CUSE!” I was surprised at how streamlined the grant application process was and how helpful the men and women at CUSE were in fielding my questions about research and travel abroad.