

A survey of 20 female entrepreneurs who work in Emilia-Romagna was carried out with the aim of investigating the reasons why women start their own companies, what skills they possess, their background and the problems they meet when starting up their business.

The companies of the entrepreneurs interviewed are small or micro enterprises that operate in the manufacturing sector, commerce and services. The entrepreneurs have been selected from amongst the participants of the IV and V competitions organised in 2001 and 2002 in Emilia-Romagna. These competitions were run with the aim of assigning funds to SMEs directed by women as specified in the national law 215/92.

On average the entrepreneurs interviewed were 36 years old; 50% had two or three children and a medium-high education level: they held a diploma or were graduated.

Almost all the entrepreneurs interviewed had founded their own company between one and four years before the interviews. Reasons for starting up their businesses included a strong wish to concentrate on and develop one of their passions, to be autonomous and to exercise their own creativity.

From the interviews it emerged that there was a strong relationship between the level of education, work experience and the new business.

Usually a negative idea of employment and a strong self-consciousness are the basis for entrepreneurial activities.

When the creation of a company is not based on knowledge or skills gained during their studies or working time, the entrepreneurs started their businesses by buying out a company already in existence, asking for support from other people or networking.

The entrepreneurs appeared not to take into consideration entrepreneurial training courses usually preferring to finance their own activities autonomously, getting loans or mortgages and asking for funds only from family or work associates. They usually tried to get public funds but were hardly successful in gaining support.

The results of the section of the research aimed at examining the image of the entrepreneurs highlight that significant personal opinions were given most importantly about attributes of ones own business and the role of the entrepreneur. 'The interviewees appeared to endorse a view that their business activities reflected a "female mode of production" (Prokop, 1978). This is characterised by a capacity to communicate needs and a handful of 'natural' abilities. This "feminine mode of production" influenced the women in the choice of their companies' activities which in most cases remained centred around sectors considered traditionally linked to women. At the same time the *success of an entrepreneur*, for the same women interviewed, depended on essential personal qualities: perseverance, constancy, creativity. Particular relevance is also given to skills related to competitiveness.