



Calmeadow West Borrowers' Group, "Always in Focus." Left to right: Bernice Goring, Pat Bullen, Jane Beulah, Sonya Nadina. Reprinted with permission from Home Business Report, Vancouver B.C. Photo: Home Business Report.

What's Happening to Entrepreneurship?

by *Mona Bandeen*

Cet article trace un bref portrait des facteurs éducatifs, économiques et sociologiques qui font des années 90 la décennie de l'entrepreneuse.

Women are responsible for over 50 per cent of the new business start-ups and the fields they are entering are as diverse as those of their male counterparts.

You're not alone if you feel that suddenly a great many people are talking about entrepreneurship and new venture start-ups as a driving force in the health of the Canadian economy for the 1990s. That isn't so surprising when we know that even in 1987 firms with fewer than 100 employees accounted for 90 per cent of the new jobs in Canada, and in some provinces that is now 98 per cent. But what is novel is that women are responsible for over 50 per cent of the new business start-ups and the fields that they are entering are as diverse as those of their male counterparts. It is not only the traditional fields that were initially an outgrowth of domestic endeavours, but today, you will also find women in oil and gas exploration, publishing, freight forwarding, waste disposal, video design systems, and all aspects of soft and hardware development.

This burst of creative enterprise is closely tied to women moving into positions of leadership, rather than solely the more traditional support roles which the public long viewed as the woman's natural domain.

But the early role models do exist. It is just that they aren't very often brought to our attention. In a young developing country such as Canada for the early homesteaders it was the wives, mothers, and sisters who produced many of the articles for sale and trade while the husbands, sons, and fathers tried to hew and till the soil to grow the first year's crop. There were individuals such as Marie-Anne Barbel, a fur trader and potter in the 1750s, Rose Fortune who owned and ran a cartage business in Nova Scotia in 1825, Mary Ann Shadd was the publisher and editor of the *Provincial Freeman*, a black newspaper in Chatham, Ontario in the 1850s, Isabella Cornell made and sold cosmetics in the North West Territories at the end of the last century, and Martha Black ran a sawmill in the Yukon in the early 1900s. Anna Bissell of Bissell

Carpet Sweepers ran and greatly grew the company in the 1890s, Florence Nightingale Graham—better known as Elizabeth Arden—born in Ontario took her fledgling company to New York in 1912, where it flourished. In the 1950s Olivia Poole developed the Jolly Jumper, which has delighted our babies, and their mothers, for over 40 years (Bohnert). So the precedent has long been established, it is just that we tend to forget how rich is the entrepreneurial heritage for women.

If we now add in the changing educational, economic, and sociological factors we can see why specifically this decade has become the decade of the entrepreneur.

In the 1990s we have two generations of business educated and experienced women who are ready to seize the possibilities created by market niches and to gamble on their own strengths and efforts. The first large group of women to enter the business, legal, and accounting faculties in the '60s were determined to gain access to corporate Canada and assimilate with the male dominated culture. Many now speak with a touch of sadness of the personal price they paid for their careers and the unfulfilled opportunities they had hoped for. In contrast, the young MBAs, CAs, and lawyers of the '90s are progressing far faster up the corporate ladders but may still see their progress curtailed by glass ceilings and corporate cultures which limit the development of their full potential. This may result in a re-evaluation of personal objectives and the opportunity to use their valued experience and contacts in developing their own venture as a viable career objective.

If we tie in with this the economic realities of the business sector in the last few years with its downsizing, mergers, and the resultant redundancies in large corporations, there has been a pool of well educated, experienced personnel forced to look at alternate opportunities from the traditional work models.

In addition to these educational and economic factors there are two other elements that I believe have influenced the entrepreneurial ground swell. One is the increase in the percentage of women in the work force, the other is the sociological change in the structure of the family unit. With more women absorbing financial responsibility for their family, we are seeing more women starting companies because they have financial needs that cannot be met by the more traditional employment practices. It really isn't that unusual to hear women say that they started their company because there was no other alternative if they wanted to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Where we at the Women's Entrepreneurship Program, Faculty of Management, at the University of Toronto have become an influence is that our courses for women

entrepreneurs have already helped over 200 women increase their management skills. Also, by initiating the Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Awards we are bringing to public attention the contemporary role models, the thousands of successful women entrepreneurs all across Canada who are sending out the message loud and clear: "we did it and so can you." When the stories about the diversity of their companies are brought to the public's attention, people become fascinated by the realization that these women have made it, that no one has been able to stop them, and that their talents are bringing them fulfilled dreams. This is the stuff of this great country. Let's enjoy and honour our entrepreneurial women business owners and the new economy companies they are creating.

Mona Bandeen is the Director of the Women's Entrepreneurship Program, Faculty of Management, University of Toronto and the Chair of the Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Awards and Conference.

References

Bohnert, Beth. *Canadian Women: Risk Takers and Change Makers*. Etobicoke: Women Inventors' Project, 1993

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though we know not what we do.

Shelley A. Leedahl's poetry book A Few Words for January (Thistledown Press), was published in 1990, and Skykickers (Thistledown Press), a short story collection, was released in 1994. She lives in Saskatoon with her husband and two children.