

# Women Entrepreneurs in the North

by Hari Dimitrakopoulou

*Un rapport important sur les femmes et le développement économique dans le nord du Manitoba a été récemment rédigé par le Réseau de développement*

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*des femmes du Nord. Ce rapport sur le développement économique des femmes examine entre autres les barrières auxquelles sont confrontées les entrepreneuses*

*ainsi que les stratégies que ces femmes développent afin de franchir ces barrières et obtenir le succès.*

The Northern Women's Development Network (NWDN) consists of Aboriginal women, immigrant women, business and professional women, labour women, women from the crisis centres, resource centres, and the YWCA, amongst others. In preparing our report, "Women and Sustainable Economic Development" for the Northern Manitoba Economic Development Commission we had first hand knowledge of both barriers facing women entrepreneurs as well as the success stories. We discovered that it is particularly important to find out how successful entrepreneurs and community organizations have acted to eliminate barriers wherever possible.

## Women and small business

Between 1975 and 1987 self-employment increased from one million to 1.6 million, an increase of 60 per cent. This compared to a growth in the paid labour force of 26 per cent. Over this period the number of self-employed women rose from 19 per cent to 28 per cent, increasing three times faster than that of men. Studies

in the 1980s suggested there were at least 650,000 women entrepreneurs in Canada. Their businesses controlled one third of the total market with over \$400 million in sales (Mckie and Thompson).

Statistics Canada figures often underestimate the number of women who are self-employed since they only look at those who are self-employed on a full-time basis. Many women are self-employed on part-time basis. The significance of home based businesses should also not be underestimated. A recent study suggested there are home based businesses in 23 per cent of Canadian homes, many of them run by women.

Despite the substantial increases in self-employment nationally and provincially, we found lower levels of self-employment in the North. This mirrors the overall economic situation of high unemployment and lower labour force participation, especially in remote Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, we were still able to find many examples in the North of successful women entrepreneurs and of successful ventures operated by women working collectively.

## Overcoming barriers

A recent study by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women identified many of the barriers facing women entrepreneurs. These included: difficulties in gaining access to capital; discrimination from suppliers, bankers, government agencies, and employees; inexperience as managers; challenges of breaking new ground and forging a new role for women; family and household pressures.

Our primary research indicated not only that many of these same barriers exist in the North, but that they are even more pronounced in this part of the country.

One woman entrepreneur, Mary Jasper of Leaf Rapids, summed up the outlook of many women.

*It was almost frowned upon two women going into business. Many women have a lot of skills they don't realize they have. Women tend to operate a business the way raise their children and they tend to succeed as a result. (NWDN 176)*

The combination of a recognition of the barriers and a determination to overcome them was a predominant characteristic of the women entrepreneurs we interviewed. Rita Pangman, a Métis woman entrepreneur, told the Network, "A key factor is common sense. You have to believe in yourself and your own judgment." (NWDN 179)

Another factor which emerged was the importance of women's networks. Judy Petersen, a woman entrepreneur in Flin Flon, pointed out, "There are a lot of other women in the same type of business. Even though we are, indirectly, competitors we support each other." (NWDN 180)

Perseverance was another common

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requirement for success. Penny Rawlings, owner of Arctic Trading in Churchill and several other businesses told of her own experience.

*At first it wasn't easy. I could only get limited business financing because the banks discriminate against Northerners. They were patronizing towards me and I had*

*to make tough decisions. I really wanted to keep the business though because I had put so much into it ... To achieve your goals you have to be innovative and stick to your plans. (NWDN 182)*

The experience of individual women entrepreneurs was important. It showed clearly that barriers can be overcome. Often one of the key factors to overcoming these barriers was

fant Products in Flin Flon. Her business had its origins in her own experience. When she had her second child she tried various baby carriers on the market but was not satisfied with any, so she made her own. Judy found that her friends were impressed by her product and she decided to start selling it locally. The sales went so well that she decided to patent the design and name the product "Baby Trekker."

The operation started on a small scale. She bought a commercial sewing machine, made arrangements with a seamstress to sew the product, and operated out of her home. To market the product Judy contacted several distributors and advertised directly in various family oriented magazines. She now has 12 distributors and the product is being marketed in Canada, the United States,

Japan, and Australia. Her company is now expanding into the production of bunting bags and diaper packs.

Judy has faced several barriers including her distance to the market. She also expressed frustration at the way some suppliers treat small businesses. She finds frustrating the degree to which banks and others require her husband's signature on documents.

Penny Rawlings owns and operates the Arctic Trading Post, a hotel, and a number of other businesses based out of Churchill. In 1978 Penny and her husband Keith opened the Arctic Trading Post because they saw a demand for locally produced arts

and crafts. They later set up an internationally distributed mail order catalogue. In 1986 her husband was tragically killed in a plane accident. Penny found herself dealing not only with the loss of her husband but the challenge of taking over the entire operation of the business. Although Penny had always been a full partner in the business, her husband had been the "starter." She was the "maintainer." She set herself a five-year goal of fully learning the business and coming up with new ideas.

The new direction she sought has been established. The business currently has ten employees. It operates Rawlings Holdings and Arctic Trading stores in Churchill, Thompson, and Winnipeg. She is looking at expansion in other locations.

The Ikwewak Greenhouse Co-op operates a commercial greenhouse on the Berens River First Nation in Manitoba. Elders in the community report that food production is not new in Berens River. Until well into the 1950's vegetables and berries were grown and harvested along trap lines. These practices declined with the increasing importation of food.

In 1990 eight women decided to form a worker's co-operative to establish a greenhouse with the assistance of Dinah Ceplis of the Provincial Department of Agriculture. Four women, Irene Bear, Hazel Moreau, Maggie Felix, and Valerie Sawanash are involved in the project on a daily basis. The greenhouse co-op has relocated to a one acre site where a garden centre and a greenhouse have been set up. Fundraising through bingo, bake sales, as well as the sale of canned goods help support the project. Elsie Bouchie, the gardening leader, was later elected Chief of the Berens River First Nation.

The Co-op is an example of sustainable commercial horticultural development in a remote Aboriginal environment. "It shows what can be developed from a foundation of long term community based grass roots leadership" (nwdn 175), pointed out Dinah Ceplis, now with the Assiniboine Community College.



Thompson Women's Trade Fair

the women entrepreneurs' support networks, whether they be family, community, or business.

### Successful initiatives

The Network looked at numerous successful ventures in Northern Manitoba. The variety of projects and initiatives undertaken by women in the North was remarkable. The markets involved ranged from local to international. What was significant was the extent to which the experiences of the developers of these initiatives are also relevant to other women.

Judy Petersen owns and operates the controlling share of Petersen In-

The YWCA in Thompson operates a women's residence. It has 40 full time employees and a budget of one million dollars. It started in 1967 when Molly Robinson, now the Executive Director of the YWCA, was operating a restaurant in Thompson. "We couldn't get residences for our employees. I decided to send a brief to the YWCA of Canada on how to start a residence for women." Sixty women attended the first meeting and by 1972 they had raised \$50,000. INCO, the local mining company, donated a former residence and the YWCA was in full operation. Molly said it was important to establish credibility.

*As in any business you have to prove yourself to people in the community. You have to show that you are viable. You have to start off slow, not wanting everything right away. When you don't businesses fail. (NWDN 183)*

The Thompson Business and Professional Women's Club Women's Trade Fair is another venture that has proven extremely successful. Three years ago, the Business and Professional Women's Club decided to try to address the problem of a lack of space to showcase the many local businesses run by women, including home and commercial based businesses, in Thompson, a mining community of 15,000 people.

The response has been overwhelming every year the Trade Fair has been held. Women have booked space for businesses ranging from clothing to children's educational material. Attendance has been excellent from both customers and merchants. The Club President, Patti McIntyre, said that the Women's Trade Fair gives women exposure on a year round basis. "It is a tremendous marketing tool for women in business" (NWDN Video).

### **The impact of the network**

From the outset, we decided not to let our report collect dust after its completion. The very process of de-

veloping the report became a catalyst for further development. Because of the Network's report several initiatives have been undertaken. The establishment of Manitoba's first loan circle for micro-ventures is under way with the help of Manitoba's Community Economic Development Fund and one of the Network's member organizations. The loan circle will address the lack of financial resources that is often a major stumbling block to women's involvement in business.

We are also working on the establishment of a community development corporation for northern women. It is intended to undertake social and economic initiatives including working with individual women entrepreneurs. One of the key features of our approach will be to establish women's networks to assist in their ventures. We are also looking at innovative ways of marketing women's products and services, ranging from developing and producing a catalogue, to using the Internet as a promotional tool.

We are also establishing a circumpolar gender-based development network to share ideas with women in other countries. We plan to extend our contact to developing countries. Ironically many models used in developing countries, such as the loan circle, are also applicable to the North. This is particularly the case in Aboriginal communities.

### **Conclusion**

Focusing only on the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs can create the false impression that there is little women can do in this area. The overall statistics documenting the growing importance of women in self employment and business, as well as the numerous examples of successful women and groups of women documented by the study, prove that this impression is false. While it has to be recognized that many women have faced barriers and continue to face barriers in business, it is important to look at how they overcame these barriers and to communicate

this to other women.

Our experience pointed time and again to the importance of women's networks. Our own formal network helped us not only to complete the report but to set up a number of initiatives. Clearly women can make a difference in many ways, including as entrepreneurs, if they have the help and support of other women.

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