

CANADIAN WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS, RESEARCH AND PUBLIC POLICY: A LITERATURE REVIEW⁴

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This digest of research about Canadian women entrepreneurs provides an overview of gender-related studies on enterprise growth and studies reporting on women's engagement in SME programs and services. An inventory of Canadian and international publications is provided. Relative to other areas of management research, women's entrepreneurship is a young literature. These studies provide insights about the growth and economic contributions of Canadian women entrepreneurs.

Industry Canada reports that in 2004, nearly half (47 percent) of all Canadian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were owned to some degree by women (Carrington, 2006). Approximately half of women business owners intend to grow their firms. Women entrepreneurs and self-employed workers seek firm growth for both economic and social reasons. Motives and growth intentions are associated with self-employment earnings and firm performance. Gender differences in self-employment earnings and firm revenue persist across occupational categories. Gender differences are reported in owners' attitudes to growth, financial profiles, management experiences and access to entrepreneurial knowledge. Moreover, women may be under-represented in entrepreneurship courses, SME development initiatives and self-employment assistance programs.

Yet, having controlled for estimates of human capital (e.g., experience, social and network capital) and firm-related factors (e.g., size, sector, innovation, age), research has not explained fully many aspects of SME growth — including why firms owned by Canadian women are less likely to seek equity capital, expand internationally or grow when compared to matched firms owned by male counterparts. Like all business owners, women entrepreneurs face many obstacles to firm growth. Some, but not all, women report gender-related barriers. These include professional and personal challenges, often underscored by a sense of 'not being taken seriously'. Certainly misperceptions persist. For example, while recent studies do not support gender bias with respect to lending by financial institutions, women entrepreneurs remain concerned about discrimination in lending practices.

Primary barriers to internationalization relate to the: time required to gather information about export markets and the export process; costs of market development including travel; locating partners, identifying consortia and establishing strategic alliances; and lack of time-efficient service delivery of industry-specific information by support agencies. Information and training needs include strategies about managing growth, versus start-up, and technology, such as the use of Internet to build services firms. Topics and best practices for future research on women entrepreneurs are presented.

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