

Executive Summary

In the past decade, female entrepreneurship in Canada has shown outstanding growth. In response to this phenomenon, a number of studies have been undertaken and training programs have been created to assist women entrepreneurs. Yet until now, there were no studies dealing with francophone women entrepreneurs in BC, nor specific programs to address their needs.

Recognizing the need to implement programs for francophone women entrepreneurs in BC, Réseau-Femmes Colombie-Britannique has undertaken this study. The primary objectives are to gain insight into the difficulties faced by this particular minority group, to determine their specific needs and make recommendations on how best to address these needs.

A study of the existing body of research on female entrepreneurship indicates that in North America women entrepreneurs often face similar difficulties, in spite of the vast differences in their businesses and personal situations. Women often choose to go into business for themselves in order to increase their freedom and flexibility and achieve greater balance with work and family obligations. They are often trying to escape the barriers to career advancement they face in the workplace. They are seeking new challenges and greater personal satisfaction. They measure their success on these terms rather than external factors such as profits and expansion. They have different objectives and as a result will run their businesses very differently from the traditional *male-driven* business model.

The findings of this study are based on the responses to a survey questionnaire as well as regional focus groups. The participants included established francophone women entrepreneurs as well as francophone women in various stages of business start-up. Some of the findings gleaned from this consultative process include:

- The majority of these entrepreneurs are between 36 and 50 years old.
- They own and operate micro-businesses in the services sector and work without employees.
- They have been in British Columbia for less than 5 years, have post-secondary education and choose their businesses according to their area of expertise.
- They are entrepreneurs by choice, for reasons related to self-determination and personal satisfaction.
- They are more interested in quality of life than profits and expansion.
- They finance their businesses with their own money.

The problems these women face in the business start-up phase include difficulties with regards to confidence, financing, lack of business knowledge, lack of support

and the need to market themselves and their business to a wider audience. The focus of the difficulties they face in the operation of their business is narrower and mostly linked to financing, marketing and work-life balance. For some women, their language, age or sex represent additional difficulties in the start-up or operation of their business.

Many women consulted, in both the surveys and the focus groups, mention financial problems as their first preoccupation. They are seeking financial tools that suit their type of business, their personal needs and their daily realities as women. They also want to see financial institutions change their attitudes towards women and micro-business.

Francophone women entrepreneurs want access to training programs that are flexible and suited to their needs. They favour modular training that also integrates topics related to the realities and difficulties faced by women in business. They want access to personalized support programs such as coaching and mentorship. They want to participate in networking and support groups with other women in order to escape isolation and assist each other.

These women entrepreneurs want to see a francophone infrastructure created to promote, assist and educate on the subject of female entrepreneurship. They also want to see significant changes in socio-economic policies such as improved child-care programs or maternal leave for self-employed women. These changes are deemed as necessary so that women may begin to reconcile and integrate family, quality of life and entrepreneurship. Above all, they want to see their vision of entrepreneurship understood and respected.

This document contains a number of strategic options designed to address the particular needs of francophone women entrepreneurs in BC. These recommendations are the result of an analysis of their specific needs, the programs and services available to them and a study of best practices in Canada and elsewhere. The first section of the recommendations details long term planning strategies and recommendations in the areas of service planning, research, public awareness, education and political lobbying. The second section examines direct services for women including training, coaching, networking and financial services.

The recommendations presented in this study are inspired by the participants' personal trials, success and life experience. The strategic options presented do not represent a universal approach to the difficulties they face, but rather choose to promote an array of service options designed to meet the diversity of needs. The onus is now on the organizations that serve francophone women and entrepreneurs to study and implement these strategic recommendations so that francophone women in BC may fully participate in the continued growth of female entrepreneurship.