

SERVICES TO WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS THE WESTERN CANADIAN CASE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite years of growth in Western Canada, the region continues to experience persistent economic challenges. These include a reliance on resource exports as well as structural issues such as unemployment and slow growth. In this context, entrepreneurship has become an important way for individuals to create jobs for the economy to expand and restructure. The federal Department of Western Economic Diversification (WD) has been active in encouraging small business throughout the Western provinces. It has become apparent from these efforts that women entrepreneurs face certain gender-specific barriers to business success. This imbalance reinforces economic inequality, and reduces the potential contributions of women-owned businesses to job creation and economic growth. WD has begun to examine ways to reduce these barriers and proposes to offer services to women entrepreneurs through the establishment of a Women's Enterprise Centre in each Western Canadian province.

BACKGROUND

Despite their significant progress in achieving economic equality, women continue to confront gender-related issues in the workplace. Women are more likely than men to encounter underemployment, occupational segregation, low pay, and limited opportunities for advancement. Given these obstacles, many women have looked to self-employment and business ownership as an option way to expand their opportunities. However, the impact of women-owned ventures is tempered by the fact that these businesses often remain small. Research has identified gender-related barriers such as systemic differences in attitudes towards and among women, limited access to capital, gaps in education and training, limited access to information, networks, and mentors, and family responsibilities as significant obstacles.

ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT SERVICES FOR WOMEN

Countries in both industrialized and developing areas have established a range of public and private sector organizations providing services to women seeking to start or expand a business. This paper examines the experiences of several such intermediaries in Europe, Asia, and the United States. In addition, two models are discussed in detail the Women's Enterprise Bureau in Newfoundland and Women Venture in Minneapolis.

Lessons from these centres include the need to lower costs by working with existing agencies to avoid duplication, especially when providing services to a rural or remote population. The paper also examines existing services in Western Canada to identify gaps in services for women entrepreneurs. Service gaps exist across the West (with regional variations) primarily in the areas of:

- financing designed to meet the needs of women entrepreneurs
- information
- referral to appropriate training and other services

- networking
- mentoring
- ongoing business counselling and aftercare

Women's Enterprise Centres can play an important part in filling service gaps by providing new services and coordinating access to existing services. Establishing partnerships with other public and private sector intermediaries is critical to effectively achieving this objective. Services needed may vary by province given that existing services from other entities and the needs of women business-owners are regionally distinct. Whether provided directly or indirectly, services should improve access to : financing, education and training, counselling, information, networking and mentoring.

CONCLUSION

The department of Western Diversification recognizes the important role women entrepreneurs are playing in the economy, and is committed to working with them to increase the number and strength of women-owned businesses in Western Canada. By helping women to meet their own goals, Women's Enterprise Centres can increase the contributions women entrepreneurs make to growth, job creation, and equity.

BÈrard, Josette and Donna Brown. Services to Women Entrepreneurs ñ The Western Canadian Case. Western Economic Diversification Canada ñ Manitoba Office. August 19, 1994.

For a complete copy of the research, please communicate with the Manitoba Women's Enterprise Centre.