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FINANCIAL POST

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Canada a global pace-setter in female entrepreneurship, but barriers still persist

By Barbara Balfour, Special to Financial Post

While Canadian women are outpacing women around the world in entrepreneurship, the country still lacks a co-ordinated national approach to women's...

With International Women's day just behind us, it's never too late to celebrate how far we've come in business - or to take a closer look at what might be getting in the way.

When it comes to women in business, Canada is a global pace-setter – women retain ownership in almost half of small businesses and contribute to the creation of 50,000 more each year.

Data published in an August 2013 report by Statistics Canada/Industry Canada show female business owners contributed to the creation of almost 10,000 jobs in 2011 alone, says Catherine Elliott, a business professor at the University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management.

Women also are experimenting with new and innovative business models that contribute to social change.

"In our research we've observed many women who start businesses are anxious to not just make a living, but also support a philanthropic cause they believe in," Ms. Elliott says. "This could include Fair Trade or the advancement of women in science."

For example, Hedwig Alexander's business, Far and Wide Collective, connects female artisans across Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the growing global marketplace, and was featured as part of 1,000 Startups, a national initiative showcasing Canadian entrepreneurs.

"Once you empower a woman financially, it changes her life and the community entirely," says Ms. Alexander, who spent nearly a decade working in Afghanistan with various charities.

"Many women in developing economies don't have the chance to go to school, but have been taught a skill by their parents such as embroidery. However, accessing the market becomes problematic when they need a credit card, have to upload their content online or ship items abroad at a cost that's three times the price of the item.

Ms. Alexander purchases from artisans in large quantities and promotes their brand online. "There's a growing demand in North America for handmade items with unique stories behind them. I thought this was a great way to meet that demand while also empowering women," she says.

Entrepreneur Heather Payne is helping solve a problem in the Canadian economy - the lack of women in high-tech

industries. Just 26 years old, Ms. Payne has already been named among Canada's top 100 most powerful women for founding two organizations that teach computer programming to women and girls.

More than 7,000 people have attended a workshop offered by her company, Ladies Learning Code, in 17 cities across Canada.

"We need to see a company such as Google or Facebook with a female founder," Ms. Payne says. "There are not enough examples of high-grossing companies that have been founded by women."

This void is a systemic barrier to the further growth of Canadian businesswomen, Ms. Elliott says. "Larger businesses in Canada tend to be male-owned. Procurement regulations to work with federal government agencies are biased towards larger companies. By the very nature of these rules, women can't access these lucrative contracts," she says.

"It's not that it's being done on purpose to discriminate against women entrepreneurs, but that is the end result."

Unlike the U.S., Canada lacks a co-ordinated national approach to women's entrepreneurship or any legislation to promote it, says Ms. Elliott.

"I think we need more household names. We need to publicize our success stories more.

Women still don't see entrepreneurship as a viable career option. How many men bring up their daughters to take over the family business?"

Victoria Lennox, co-founder and chief executive of Startup Canada, has seen tremendous shifts in the role women are playing in shaping the entrepreneurship ecosystem. "There are definitely many unique women who, through their leadership, have impacted seismic shifts," she says.

"But many shifts still need to take place at the global, national, community, family and personal ranks for us, as women, to transcend to the next level."

Going back to Afghanistan last year, Ms. Hedwig - now a mother of two and the wife of Chris Alexander, Canada's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration - found juggling family and entrepreneurship enabled her to connect with Afghan women more profoundly than before.

"We had a completely different conversation, suddenly connecting on this other level as women. It didn't matter where we came from - we had the same challenges where we wondered how we could manage it all.

"Women really can help each other no matter where they are. The only reason I have my business today is because I met a wonderful Canadian businesswoman who believed in me."

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