

## **Are Men really better in business than Women?**

By Catherine Wijnberg - MBA, M.Agr.Sc. BSc.Agric.(Hons)

The latest Global Entrepreneurship monitor shows that in South Africa men are 1.6 times more likely to succeed as business owners than women.

This shocking statistic is reported to be a particularly South African phenomenon. Amongst other things, it appears to be related to low levels in self-belief amongst women that they have the knowledge, skills and experience to start and succeed in business.

As owner of a business that is dedicated to supporting the growth of entrepreneurs, and a single mother of three girls, the reasons for this situation (and more importantly the possible solutions) have special relevance.

The problem of gender inequality and gender violence is well documented in our country – and this in itself is enough to reduce the self-confidence and self-belief of women. However, it is only when travelling outside the main centres that one sees the broader effects of this inequality – where girl children are pulled out of school at a young age to help around the house, and the prevailing attitude seems to be 'why bother?', as they will invariably marry young and/ or be pregnant by the age of 16 or 17.

This is certainly not only a South African problem - I recall being shocked at the low levels of schooling amongst girl children in rural Zambia, where girls are removed from school and married off as young as 13! Of course part of this equation is the effect of culture, and cultures which entrench the concept of women as second class citizens incapable of independent thought should not be surprised when these same women fail as entrepreneurs.

But its not just culture, nor education that holds women entrepreneurs back – and for this I am a case in point. I was raised as an equal in a family of boys, and am blessed with a post-graduate education - so from a self-belief, cultural and skills perspective I score tops. Yet despite this I have had to shoulder some burdens from which the average man is shielded.

Firstly, I have no wife at home to care for the children, do the shopping, cleaning, laundry – I do that. Secondly and possibly most significant, I care for everyone else too – often both financially and emotionally – my mother, my staff, my community.

I am by no means the outlier in this statistic – many, if not most women entrepreneurs are wives and mothers who run the business with one hand and the world with the other. The more rural the environment, the harder the task as rural women face challenges of water collection, firewood collection, atrocious health support systems, and often an oppressive cultural environment.

My own experience in running country-wide enterprise development programmes assisting emerging entrepreneurs and community projects, provides some wonderfully inspiring examples of successful women entrepreneurs, proving that with the appropriate opportunities women can certainly compete, if not surpass men as entrepreneurs.

So within this reality, how can we help women rise to find independence, wealth, satisfaction and success as entrepreneurs?

**Firstly women and girls need to learn to be more selfish.** They need to know that not only is it okay to put themselves first, to 'say no', but that unless they do they will endlessly remain the supporter of someone else's dreams, and

never achieve their own. Women need to know that success comes to those who focus, say 'Yes!' to opportunity, and step up to grab hold of their dreams.

**Secondly, success breeds success**, and women and girls need to be supported in the belief that they can be successful business leaders and entrepreneurs. This begins with exposure to success stories, and by seeing successful women at work in their communities. One such example of a true female role model is Eunice Mlotywa of Iliwa, based in Khayelitsha township in the Western Cape & beneficiary of the Old Mutual Legends Programme. Eunice has over the years single-handedly built a highly successful sewing and beading business, and as her confidence and success increases she is branching out into other gaps in the market, opening a spaza shop and selling airtime and electricity to the community. In amongst all this, Eunice somehow finds the time to manage a feeding scheme for the aged, be a mentor to young girls in the community, run training workshops and be a mother herself. Hers is a story that needs to be told, to inspire other women to rise up and make an impact.

**Thirdly education breeds confidence and capability** so women need to be properly educated – all the way to matric and beyond. And education needs to include subjects such as maths, science, computer literacy, communications and public speaking, all vital components of a leadership and business role. I recall an experience in Mpumalanga in 2009, when providing business skills training to a group of rural women and discovering that almost half of them were functionally illiterate. One lady could hardly hold a pen to place a cross where her signature should go, and yet this woman was dynamic, highly intelligent and capable – on the face of it far more capable than her brother sitting on the opposite side of the room, who had been educated to matric level. Given the right education opportunities, who knows what she might achieve?

**Lastly as winners mix with winners** women need to surround themselves with people who enable them to succeed as women, and as mothers and as business leaders! This means creating support networks, access to peer groups and mentors who support them in their goal to succeed and lead. One of my favourite success stories is the Inina Craft Cooperative from Eshowe near the valley of a thousand hills, KZN. This group of 150 Zulu mothers and grandmothers, most of whom are illiterate and have little or no formal education, have created a thriving business using the traditional weaving, beading and handcraft skills within their community. Inina is efficiently managed by suitably skilled local women, for the benefit of local women. In the true spirit of mothering, they even find the time and generosity to create and support an orphanage for HIV-affected children in the community.

So, while the data may show that men are 1.6 times more likely to be successful entrepreneurs in South Africa, perhaps the real measure of success should be not simply the number of men or women in business, but the impact that their success has? If we look closely at the wider benefits that women in business create – beyond income and job creation to family stability and community support – it may be just as accurate to say that successful female entrepreneurs offer 1.6 times more value to the economy and the country as a whole, than their male counterparts!

**Catherine Wijnberg** is recognised as a catalyst for her innovative thinking in the field of small business development. She is the Director of Fetola & Associates, a fast growing enterprise development agency that operates throughout Southern Africa, as well as the Fetola Foundation, a not-for-profit organization made up of individuals with a desire to make an impact in sustainable community development.

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