

A new era for female
entrepreneurs in York
and North Yorkshire



Enterprise Works

RETHINKING BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

1. GENDERED ROLES AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP



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ENABLING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Supporting female entrepreneurs is not only a matter of fairness; it is a major economic opportunity. Women remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship, yet unlocking this potential drives business creation, innovation and inclusive growth. In regions like York and North Yorkshire, where micro and small businesses dominate, enabling more women to start and scale businesses strengthens local resilience and prosperity.

This research shows that women face additional structural and societal barriers; from gendered expectations and caring responsibilities to confidence gaps and the under-recognition of their skills.

Without intentional change in how support is designed and delivered, these barriers will continue to limit both individual and regional potential.

Who are these guides for?

These Guides are for practitioners, policymakers, business support organisations, educators and ecosystem builders who support and shape environments for female entrepreneurs. Created from the *New Era for Female Entrepreneurship in York & North Yorkshire* research, they draw directly on the lived experiences, challenges and ideas for change shared by women entrepreneurs across the region, translating those insights into practical, place-based guidance to help business support organisations better understand and respond to their needs.

How to use the guides

Use each guide as a practical and reflective tool:

- **Read with intent** – focus on lived experiences, not just key findings.
- **Challenge assumptions** – identify where existing support may reinforce barriers.
- **Adapt your practice** – apply insights to programme design, delivery and communication.
- **Embed change** – integrate inclusive approaches at both operational and strategic levels.

The guides highlight key themes such as confidence, visibility, networks and systemic bias, offering practical starting points for discussion, programme development and policy design.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CONFIDENCE AND GENDERED ROLES

- Many women described feeling they had to “prove themselves” before being taken seriously, despite having strong skills and experience
 - ➔ **Action:** Build validation into every interaction - explicitly recognise existing capability in diagnostics, mentoring and delivery
- Some described business spaces as “not for people like me” or dominated by more confident voices
 - ➔ **Action:** Offer structured, facilitated formats alongside open networking to reduce reliance on confidence-led participation
- Confidence was often described as something that “comes and goes” depending on experience and feedback
 - ➔ **Action:** Address underlying factors (recognition, representation, access) rather than treating confidence as a standalone issue
- A lack of visible, relatable role models made it harder to see business as a viable option
 - ➔ **Action:** Consistently showcase diverse local women running different types of businesses

1. GENDERED ROLES AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Perceptions and prejudice can both positively and negatively impact a person or group. They are often fuelled by a mix of individual experiences, culture and society, media and socialisation processes amongst many other factors. The women interviewed in this research talked about the impact that socialisation and culture have on them and their lived experiences as women entrepreneurs.

GENDER ROLES

Gender roles are culturally defined and vary significantly across societies and time periods. From an early age, societal norms shape our understanding of gender-appropriate behaviours. Historically, women have been cast as homemakers, valued for their nurturing qualities, while men have been expected to assume breadwinning and leadership roles. Leadership research demonstrates how the entrepreneurship of women is often positioned as less serious to their men counterparts whilst solely recognising gender as one 'category' without considering the myriad articulations within it and its perception.¹

“There needs to be more awareness raising around unconscious bias as well. For women as well. We've been socialised in such a way, to behave in such a way that we, it's so ingrained, we don't even know it ourselves” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Women interviewed talk about the difficulty in balancing their many expected roles on top of running their business(es). This lies in contrast to men entrepreneurs. There are some reflections from those interviewed that men in business can rely on their partners or spouses to take care of domestic duties while they focus on running their business. While this stereotype is not universal, it underscores the gendered expectations that dictate familial roles. Running a business is already demanding and managing this on top of additional roles within the household contributes to more stress and pressure.

¹ Sara Nadin, Robert Smith, and Sally Jones, 'Heroines of Enterprise: Post-Recession Media Representations of Women and Entrepreneurship in a UK Newspaper 2008–2016', *International Small Business Journal* 38, no. 6 (1 September 2020): 557–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242620913209>.

“ I know it’s a stereotype, but it’s a stereotype for a reason, but most men in business have partners, wives, whatever, who do all the childcare, the cooking, the shopping, the cleaning, the accounts, the ringing of the suppliers. We have to do all of that on top of running our businesses.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“ I’m a single mum, divorced mum, and now I’m juggling lots of things and sometimes it feels really hard ... we have that as well, more than men have to do, I think that’s the generalization, but I think it’s probably still true that women still take on most of the chores and the childcare.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

This is made even more difficult for women when there is a natural expectation that it is them who will adjust their schedule to fulfil roles. Feelings of being overwhelmed by the unequal distribution of responsibilities are common. This interviewee’s reference to household duties falling ‘all one me’, highlights the gendered nature of responsibilities and the expectations to fulfil these duties regardless of other commitments. Other women feel the burden of societal expectations through the perception others have of their assumed role.

“ I find it incredibly hard that even if I am the main earner, that when it comes to taking the dogs to the vets or needing this **it’s all on me** ... Whatever it is, it’s me that has to bend. I find that awful.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

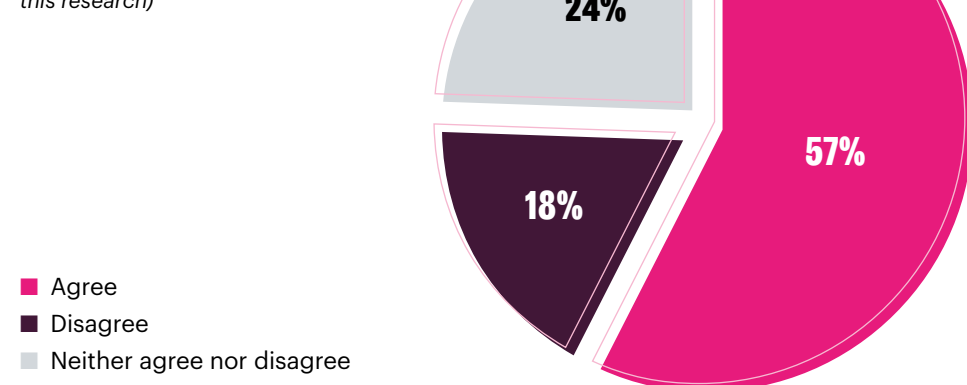
“ My husband was the first name on the school contact list because he was in York, yet they always rang me.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Approaching 3 in 5 (57%) of those surveyed agree that the mental load of running a business with everyday life is a barrier to their business continuity and/or growth.

Societal expectations have many consequences for women. They may face limited opportunities for professional growth. They may have perceptions around the skills that women possess, why they work in self-employment and

Figure 1: Level of agreement with: The mental load of running a business with everyday life is a barrier to my business continuity and/or growth.

(Source: Survey conducted as part of this research)



Due to rounding, numbers may not always total 100

how they fulfil these roles. The tension between stereotypical masculine and feminine roles is played out in the assumption that husbands are expected to provide for their wives. The below quote upholds harmful stereotypes about both the woman’s and the man’s role. It also demonstrates an expectation that women will not have financial independence from their husband.

“ Even my husband actually has had someone say to him, ‘Is your business not doing well enough to support your wife?’” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

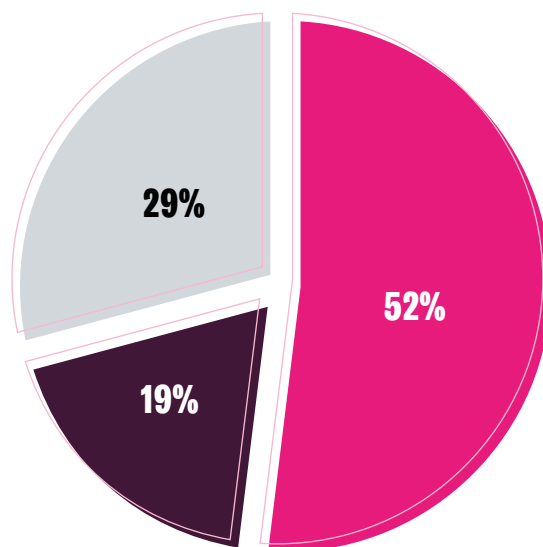
GENDER ROLES AND BUSINESS

Societal expectations of women and their gendered roles have an impact on the valuation of ‘female skills’ and ‘female work’. There is a perception that women entrepreneurs are not ambitious, are not serious about their business, and do not prioritise profit. Women are expected to instead prioritise their children, which inhibits their ability to be ‘real entrepreneurs’. Self-employment is a ‘stop-gap’ between returning to employment after raising children.

“Going back to assumptions, that women have got kids and they’re not ambitious, they don’t want to do this, they don’t want to do that. They just want to play it small. They’re only doing it until they get their other career. They’re going to go back to work.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Figure 2: Please select your level of agreement with the following statements: I am taken seriously as an entrepreneur.

(Source: Survey conducted as part of this research)



■ Agree
■ Disagree
■ Neither agree nor disagree

Such experiences are further quantified in the finding that 1 in 5 (19%) women surveyed did not feel that they are taken seriously as an entrepreneur while just over half (52%) did. These feelings are magnified when crossed with other personal attributes or identities.

“Feeling inadequate or not taken seriously due to my age.”²

Stereotypes can limit the perception of capability that women entrepreneurs have. Women speak of being dismissed alongside the potential of their business. Their business is minimized and quickly categorised due to the

² From survey completed as part of this research. Q. When thinking specifically about growth and scaling your business(es), what barriers, if any, have you experienced?

gender of the business owner. There are inherent prescribed limitations to women-led businesses.

“I sat in a meeting ... and I was told in an open meeting by a man on the panel that maybe I should join the women over-50s group. I spoke to an MP who came up here who suggested I sell my products at farmers’ markets.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

There are also challenges around the qualities that are expected of women and their association as negative or unconducive to entrepreneurship. This is evident through the ‘meekness’ that can be associated with femininity and the contrast this may have with qualities generally associated with entrepreneurship such as being outspoken and possessing leadership qualities. Experiences demonstrate that if a woman deviates too far from this expected ‘meekness’ and does have traditional entrepreneurial qualities, these skills can be perceived as negative. All the while, women should not lose touch with their femininity by becoming too concerned with making money.³

“If a woman does it, they’re aggressive, but if a man does it, they’re assertive.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

“People used to say, ‘You’ve got a chip on your shoulder.’...because you’re female and you’re outspoken.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

There is the further challenge that women feel unable to speak out on these issues because if they make complaints, it can be construed as negative.

“I think one of the challenges is we don’t want to make complaints because otherwise it will reflect badly on us. Then we’re not going to get the help either.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Many women work within the health and wellness sector and voluntary sector. These sectors frequently demand skills that align with traits traditionally viewed as weaknesses, usually being compassionate and caring.

³ Nadin, Smith, and Jones, ‘Heroines of Enterprise’.

However, in the home, women fill these roles for minimal or no pay and there is an extension of this mentality to sector standards. This can lead to a consistent undervaluation of this type of emotional trade that is common in women dominated sectors.

“The types of services we’re providing that are caring, kind, compassionate, nurturing, the voluntary sector tries to fill as many gaps as it can, so people are used to seeing it for zero or minimal cost.”

CITY ENTREPRENEUR

“A lot of people’s businesses are actually themselves. It’s knowledge, isn’t it? It’s not a practical kind of skill like building a house or something like that. It’s more emotional trade, I guess.”

RURAL ENTREPRENEUR

Research demonstrates the need to challenge this valuation of female skills. Rethinking skills in this way can boost the valuation of the skills that women have.

“We need to have an understanding that there’s unconscious biases ingrained in people and making it more okay to have the skills that women possess, and they’re not seen as weaknesses.”

CITY ENTREPRENEUR

In addition to emphasising the positive qualities that women have, there is a process of dismantling the unconscious bias that women may have of their own skillsets of entrepreneurs. As part of the survey for this research, we asked participants to select the skills they thought a successful entrepreneur should have and the skills that they themselves possess. With few exceptions, participants generally selected a lower rate of personal skill attainment in contrast to the skills they select that a successful entrepreneur would possess. OECD research demonstrates that women are only 80% as likely as men to report having the skills needed to start a business.⁴

Included in the above chart are the skills with the greatest difference between personal skills and skills of a successful entrepreneur. What is striking is the high difference rates most notably in business planning and financial management.

4 OECD and European Commission, *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023*.

Figure 3: Skills of a successful entrepreneur and skill I possess

(Source: Survey conducted as part of this research)



While almost 3 in 4 (73%) believe that business planning is needed as a skill for a successful entrepreneur, only 36% of respondents felt that they had this skill. This may reflect difficulties women have in attaining consistent business support. It may reflect difficulties they experience in not been taken seriously and the precariousness of the role. Many women enter self-employment to provide an income for their family. This is prioritised, meaning that there is no headspace for future planning. It may also reflect that women simply do not have the time with all of their additional responsibilities.

Perceptions of skills of financial management also shows the same trend. Where just over 2 in 3 (68%) think that financial management is needed for successful entrepreneurship, just over 1 in 3 (36%) surveyed think they have this skill. Comparable to business planning, this may reflect the host of challenges the women experience in attaining finance and funding for their business, further contextualised in section 3 of this report.

Interestingly, the greatest difference where personal skills show the greatest difference to the skills of a successful entrepreneur to the favour of the personal skills is in certified skills/formal qualifications. Indeed, where just 27% of respondents felt that certified skills/formal qualifications are necessary for a successful entrepreneur⁵, half (50%) of respondents surveyed had such skills.⁶

This may reflect the sectors of the participants included in the survey but also suggests that women may undervalue their own skills or feel imposter syndrome that they have these skills. Impostor syndrome implies not feeling as if one's position is warranted or earned. This experience of imposter syndrome and entrepreneurship is intersectional with gender roles, unconscious bias and stereotypes about the limits of women's ability and their roles. It all exists in a systemic cycle that acts to internalise fear and make women insecure of their abilities.

“I think women suffer far more from imposter syndrome than men do.” RURAL ENTREPRENEUR

⁵ From survey completed as part of this research. Q. Which of the following skills do you think a successful entrepreneur possesses?

⁶ From survey completed as part of this research. Q. Which of the following skills do **you** possess?

“I think I was so lacking in confidence because I saw all these seemingly successful people around me and I was feeling unsuccessful.” CITY ENTREPRENEUR

This feeling of uncertainty can be further exacerbated when working in a woman-dominated industry. This could be linked to the perception that men are more successful business owners and leads to concerns that women working within a female-dominated space do not have a male benchmark to rely upon as an example of a 'proper business'.

“So when you're ... in more female-dominated industries, you then have the, well, is this a business? Do I have a business? Is this a proper business because my business doesn't look like those businesses?” CITY ENTREPRENEUR

Women sometimes feel that they are 'unemployable' and lack the appropriate skills to be able to (re)enter the workforce on a position that would reflect their value and experience.

“I don't have a university degree and I don't have exams and letters and things. I don't feel that I am employable anymore, or I couldn't command a wage that would be worth it.” RURAL ENTREPRENEUR

Linked closely to imposter syndrome is lack of confidence. Lack of confidence is a challenge faced by 1 in 4 (24%) women surveyed as part of this research.⁷ Entrepreneurship can be viewed as a second option, and this is also felt by our participants as an issue in early education and career options for women.

“Oh, okay, you can start your own business. It's a second option.” CITY ENTREPRENEUR

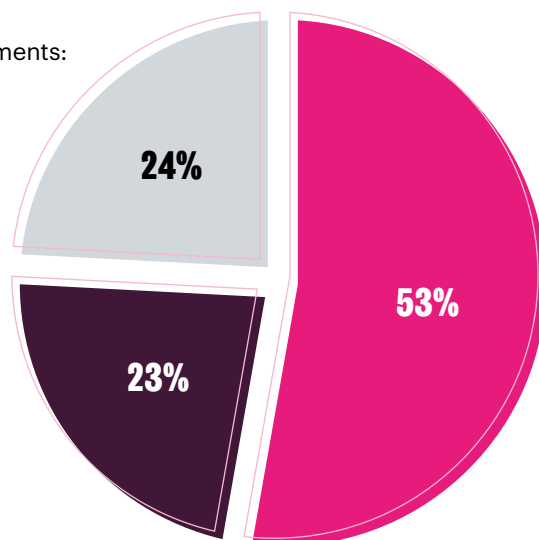
⁷ From survey completed as part of this research. Q. Which challenges, if any, have you faced in your entrepreneurial journey?

Research demonstrates that children are four times as likely to think of a man than a woman when they hear the word entrepreneur.⁸ Research by Santander also shows that just over 3 in 5 (63%) of girls never thought about starting their own business and that parents play a role in perpetuating an entrepreneurship gender divide.⁹ Just over a 1 in 3 (35%) girls saying they had been encouraged to consider entrepreneurship as a career compared to just over 2 in 5 (42%) boys.¹⁰

Perception plays into the availability of entrepreneurship as a career option for women and can inhibit women's ability to see and see themselves as business owners. Approaching 1 in 4 (23%) of those surveyed feel that they do not see many female role models, underscoring the need to increase visibility.

Women interviewed talked about their experiences in self-employment, but there was a disconnect when realising or acknowledging the scale of how they were working.

Figure 4: Please select your level of agreement with the following statements: I see many women role models.
(Source: Survey conducted as part of this research)



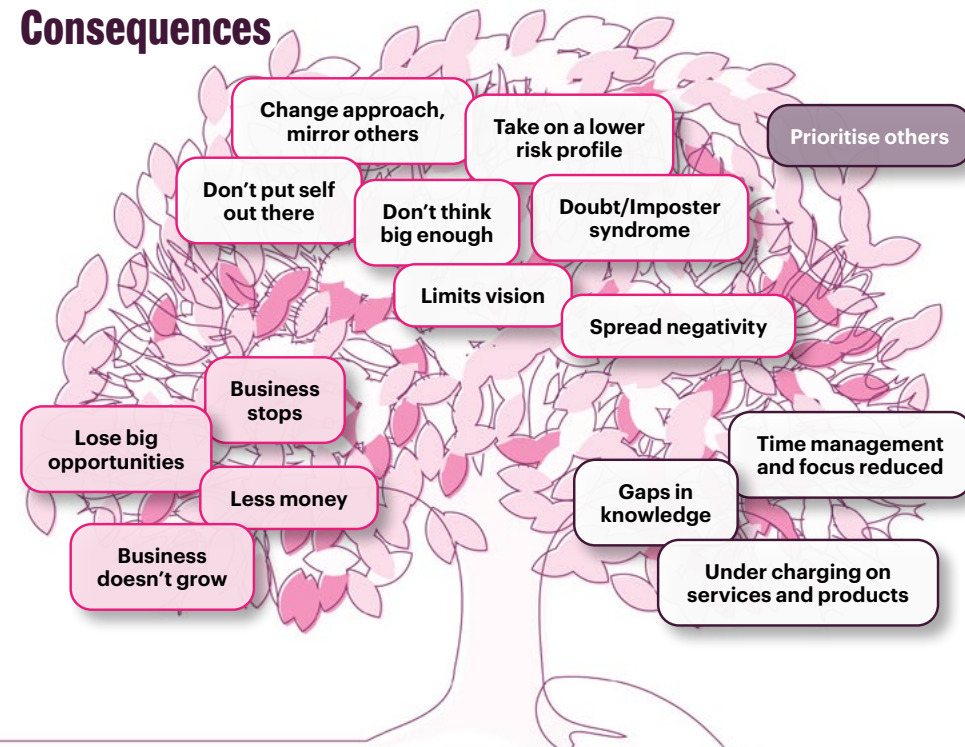
■ Agree
■ Disagree
■ Neither agree nor disagree

⁸ Santander, 'Eight in Ten Young People Can't Name One Female Entrepreneur | Santander UK', 2020.

⁹ ibid

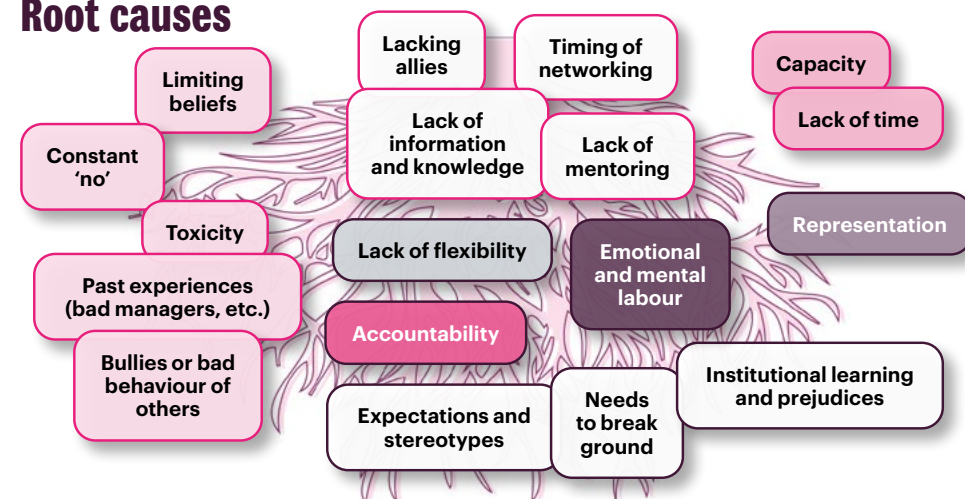
¹⁰ ibid

Consequences



LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Root causes

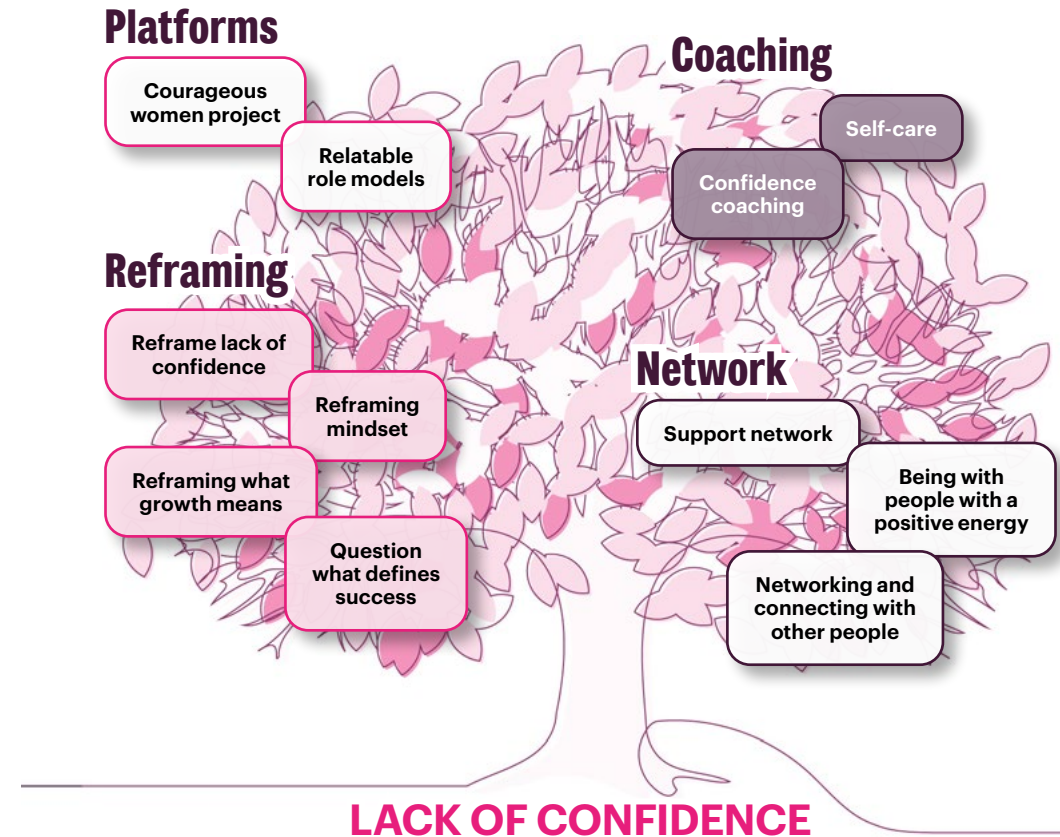


“15 or 20 years ... I dabbled in self-employment without realizing that that's what I was doing ... and then now I have a business. Then I was like, oh, actually that makes sense. You know, that was something that I was looking for, but I didn't know that I was looking for it.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

“I didn't actually see myself as a businesswoman. I was just self-employed, that wasn't a business.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

Visibility is important to counteract these perceptions of what an entrepreneur should look like and to highlight the vast range of identities that entrepreneurs have.

“We also need visibility because if a light is being shown on us, we're getting more visible. If we're getting more visible, more organisations, more potential clients are seeing us.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**





Research

The original research was conducted by Dr Rebecca Kerr, Y-PERN policy research fellow, with support from Professor Kiran Trehan and Professor John Hudson (Y-PERN academic leads).

Partners

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