

A new era for female
entrepreneurs in York
and North Yorkshire



Enterprise Works

RETHINKING BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

2. PATHWAYS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT



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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

2. PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT

- Many described their route into business as “not planned” or shaped by needing flexibility or fitting around other responsibilities
→ **Action:** Design support that reflects non-linear journeys, allowing people to step in, out and back in without restarting
- For some, self-employment was the only way to make work “fit around life”
→ **Action:** Position enterprise support as a realistic employment pathway, linked to skills and employability support
- Decisions about starting or growing a business were often described as something discussed and negotiated at home
→ **Action:** Provide information and resources that can be shared beyond the individual, supporting household-level decision-making
- Several women spoke about not recognising their own experience as “business-relevant”
→ **Action:** Use onboarding and diagnostics to actively translate lived experience into business capability
- The support landscape was often described as “confusing” or “hard to navigate”
→ **Action:** Strengthen coordination and referrals so individuals are guided, not left to self-navigate

2. PATHWAYS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT



“My job went from being hybrid to having to be in the London office, which was just not acceptable when you’ve lived in [North Yorkshire] and done the job successfully for a period of time. I found that really dreadful, that all of a sudden I was being told that I wasn’t good enough because I wasn’t physically present.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“When I worked at [supermarket] I was trying to work up there to a manager’s position. I was taking all the night shifts and stuff, and all the extra shifts, and all the covering and stuff, but they always kept putting me on the till because I was smiley.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“I did my CV and put that I had a baby, I’d been on maternity leave. I wanted part-time work at that point. Nothing. Every job I applied for, I never even got an interview, didn’t get an acknowledgement, nothing. So, I took the baby off ... [I] got an interview, and they were like, ‘What have you been doing for the last 15 months?’ I said, ‘Well, I had a baby.’ ‘Right. Well, are you planning on having any more?’” **COASTAL ENTREPRENEUR**

WHY SELF-EMPLOYMENT?

Why do women go into self-employment in YNY? The answer is complex and often reflects the myriad of social challenges that are associated with women and work.

Of the women surveyed as part of this research, 42% claim that a main driver behind founding their business was to pursue their personal ambition.¹

“I’ve been self-employed for 14 years, and I’ve just always had a fire in my belly. I always knew I’d lead people. I just knew that I had that leadership sort of business quality in people.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

¹ From survey completed as part of this research. Q. What were/are the main drivers behind founding your own business?

Other women pursue self-employment to have control over their own working environment and to structure their own goals.

“So it was kind of being master of my own destiny and fulfilling my goals rather than the goals of somebody else.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

But many women are pushed rather than pulled into self-employment.

Unhealthy workplaces have been a catalyst for many women to enter self-employment. This is reflected in the many instances of women no longer being fulfilled by employment (34%), being undervalued in the workplace (33%), and their inability to get a job to match their skills or experience (13%).²

WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

“Was asked if I felt appreciated by the company I was working with, and I just looked at the person who was asking the question and went, ‘No, not at all.’” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Many different forms of discrimination were experienced by women in the workplace. They often include discriminatory attitudes or behaviours prevalent in the sectors they work in, impacting the women’s opportunities for advancement, recognition, or fair treatment.

“There a lot of the customers were groping Emily*.³ We spoke to the boss about it and he said it was part of the job. Then he said we had to wear make-up in the bar.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

This serves as a motivating factor to explore independent opportunities to allow more control over their work environment and interactions. Women express a perception of encountering discrimination virtually wherever they go, indicating a pervasive and systemic issue rather than isolated incidents.

² ibid

³ Not her real name

“I faced discrimination from different people in that sector. I thought, well, actually, maybe I’d be better off going independent. So that was another motivation for me.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Issues around workplace behaviours are also evident in staff management, in being micro-managed and in not being respected. The range of experiences demonstrate a pattern of conflict and dismissal experienced by women in their relationships with managers, both men and women. This suggests the importance of supportive work environments and advocacy efforts to address issues of respect in the workplace.

“Not feeling respected. I butted heads with managers a lot, if it was male managers, and then I’d just get fired.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“There was micromanaging going on continuously, which was what contributed to the burnout because I just could not get anything done for being phoned and contacted.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

It is difficult to progress in a job where the company structure does not align with the values of women workers or has a particular view on who they feel is capable of managerial roles.

“I think for me it was hitting a ceiling in the job that I was in. I was being passed over for promotions that I could do standing on my head.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

This difficulty around progression is further complicated when considering the social expectations around men and women. It becomes difficult for women to progress when men usually have less ‘gaps’ on their CV.

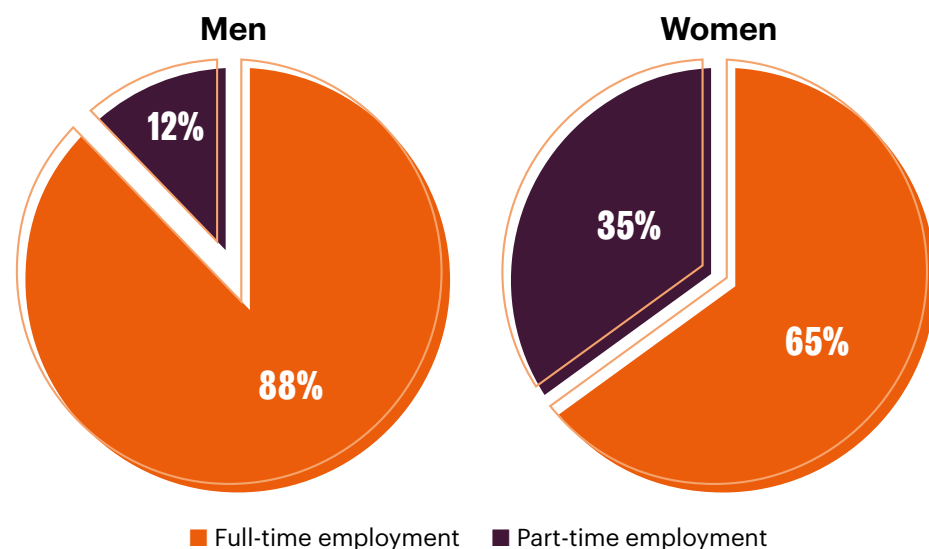
FAMILY AND CARE-GIVING RESPONSIBILITIES

Familial responsibilities are a catalyst when pursuing work flexibility for 4 in 10 (39%) women surveyed.⁴ The need for flexibility demonstrates the complex interplay of the many jobs that women have in their working and personal life. While the balancing act of employment and parental duties are not limited to women, this research underscores the persistent 'double shift' effect where women will primarily shoulder familial and household responsibilities. In response to this, women often seek flexibility in their employment to juggle work hours with their various other commitments.

Census data shows that women have a higher rate of part-time employment compared to their men counterparts.

Figure 5: Employee working patterns

Source: ONS data. (2024). Full-time, part-time and temporary workers⁵



Some women have been ousted from employment because their employer would not negotiate the potential of working part-time, while others have found themselves at a disadvantage in their career because of their desire to work part-time to meet their other responsibilities.

⁴ From survey completed as part of this research. Q. What were/are the main drivers behind founding your own business?

⁵ SA: Full-Time, Part-Time and Temporary Workers (Seasonally Adjusted) – Office for National Statistics, accessed 21 May 2024.

“ ‘I would love to come back, could I do part-time?’ ‘No.’ Not at all, wasn’t even up for discussion.” **COASTAL ENTREPRENEUR**

These issues of incompatibility between employment and flexibility are symptomatic of misaligned values between employee and employer. Research has demonstrated challenges between the employment market and mothers, in particular, with company structures and the employment market broadly.

“ I was having a family and it didn’t fit in the company structure they have now.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“ I got to director level in a company, quite a male-orientated company, and then I started to have my family which marginalised me.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

There were multiple experiences amongst the women of having difficulty in applying for jobs, getting promotions or even in retaining their jobs due to being a mother. Multiple women talk about not being able to get job interviews due to having been on maternity leave, asked if they had plans to have more children and being made redundant while on maternity leave.

“ I was on maternity leave when I got made redundant.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

The pressure to adhere to traditional work norms may force individuals to choose between advancing their careers or fulfilling family obligations. They may even judge women poorly for prioritising their family’s needs.

“ She said it was unprofessional to walk out of a meeting and go and see to your daughter’s needs. It’s a priority.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Lack of flexibility compounded with lack of local infrastructure to support women inhibits the woman’s ability to stay in the employed workforce. This becomes further apparent when women reflected on childcare facilities and their availability.

“On a Friday you can’t get any nursery places anywhere. I only clocked this the other day, why it’s Friday morning. I can’t get my kids childcare on a Friday morning. Friday morning is changeover day so everybody will be cleaning. A lot of the women will be cleaning holiday cottages and stuff like that. So you cannot get childcare on a Friday morning.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

“So, I evolved into being self-employed because there was no nursery, there was no support. I rang and applied for so many jobs that I was overqualified for, but could I work mornings and then afternoons? No. It was this and that was it. There was no option. That was the role, and you either took it or you left it. So, that was why I went into working for myself.” **COASTAL ENTREPRENEUR**

On top of caring responsibilities for children, there are also those who are simultaneously caring for their parents or wider family members. The dual caregiving responsibilities place a significant demand on the time and energy of those doing a lot of the caregiving.

“Having said that, you were saying young children, but my generation also have parents and parents-in-law who require support. So we’re a sandwich generation; I’ve got both.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

There is a cyclical nature that underscores the ongoing and evolving nature of caregiving throughout life. The unpredictability of caregiving responsibilities disrupts daily routines and makes it difficult to maintain work schedules.

“So one day I’m taking mum to the hospital one time, all right, so then I’m meeting a social worker on Thursday, so that is that morning wiped out or whatever, so now it’s changed that I’m thinking about them.” **RURAL ENTREPRENEUR**

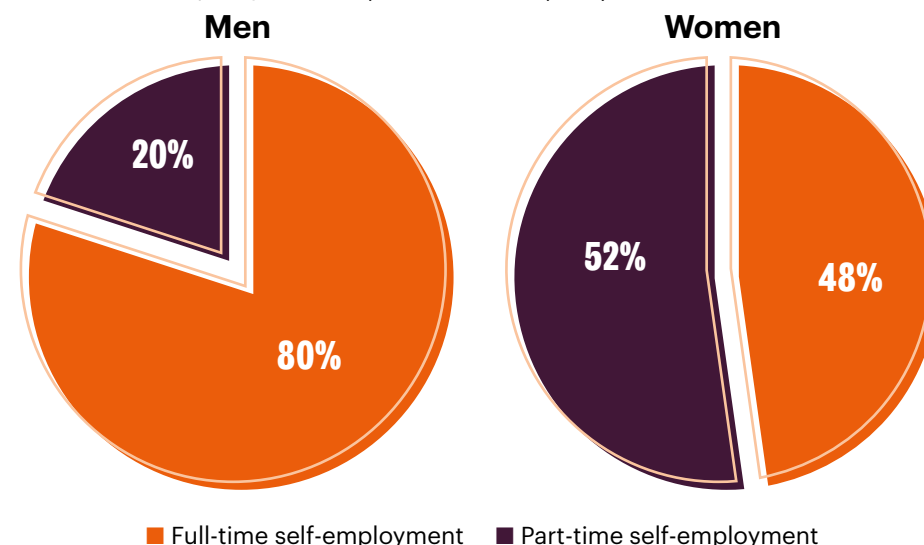
There is a high prevalence of family caregiving responsibilities in the area that co-exists with a low recognition of the challenges faced and the invisibility of the role.

“I would say as well, you have, in Yorkshire, particularly in this area, is you have a really high percentage of family carers, which is very underacknowledged. So, what you have is lots and lots of people juggling lots and lots of roles that perhaps lots of people don’t know about as well.” **COASTAL ENTREPRENEUR**

Survey data demonstrates that just over half (54%) of the women surveyed are primary carers for a child/children or another adult(s).⁶

Figure 6: Self-employed working patterns

Source: ONS data. (2024). Full-time, part-time and temporary workers



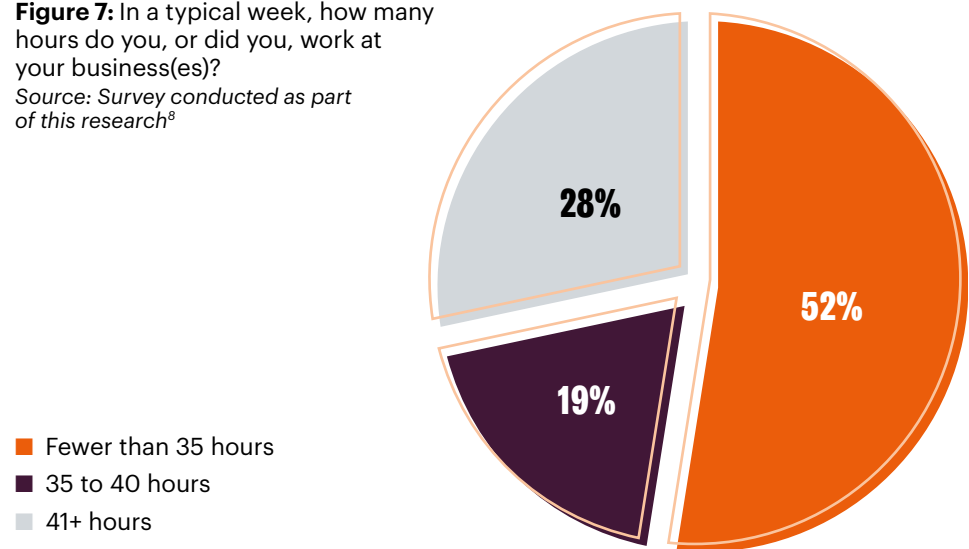
From our survey, we see that just over half (52%) of women work part-time. This reflects national trends.⁷

6 From survey completed for this research. Q. Do you have any caring responsibilities for a child/children or/and another adult(s)?

7 From survey completed for this research: Q. In a typical week, how many hours do you, or did you, work at your business(es)? Part-time work is characterised by working fewer than 35 hours in a week.

Figure 7: In a typical week, how many hours do you, or did you, work at your business(es)?

Source: Survey conducted as part of this research⁸



While challenges around hours worked does stretch into self-employment, there is an ability to work a lot more flexibility. This does not imply that a woman will work less hours but implies that a woman can work more productively and have greater autonomy over their working day and autonomy to complete their work the way they see fit, the way they want, and to make work fit around their lives.

“Flexible working is looking at doing your job in a different way.”
CITY ENTREPRENEUR

THE FAMILY/LIFE COMMITMENTS TREE

Initial qualitative data indicates that while achieving a balance between family and work life can lead individuals to pursue self-employment, this challenge continues to persist even after becoming self-employed. Therefore, balancing family/life commitments was included as a core theme in our workshop.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a variety of societal pressures and stereotypes, which often portray women as homemakers and caregivers, are identified as the causes of challenges related to this work/family/life balance. It crunches time for the women who are overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities they have, adding to barriers in business growth.

“Time is always my biggest barriers, I have to be available to care for my 3 young children, if there are holidays, sickness, the responsibility lands with me. Household duties are overwhelming with a young family so there is never any time to catch up with myself.”⁹

There is an expectation for women to juggle these responsibilities, and if they can't fulfil their family roles, it often leads to feelings of guilt.

Having sufficient time to take on these roles of business owner and homemaker and caregiver puts strain on the woman, increasing her cognitive load. The mental effort required to process and manage these competing demands can lead to feelings of stress and of being overwhelmed, having a negative impact on her own wellbeing.

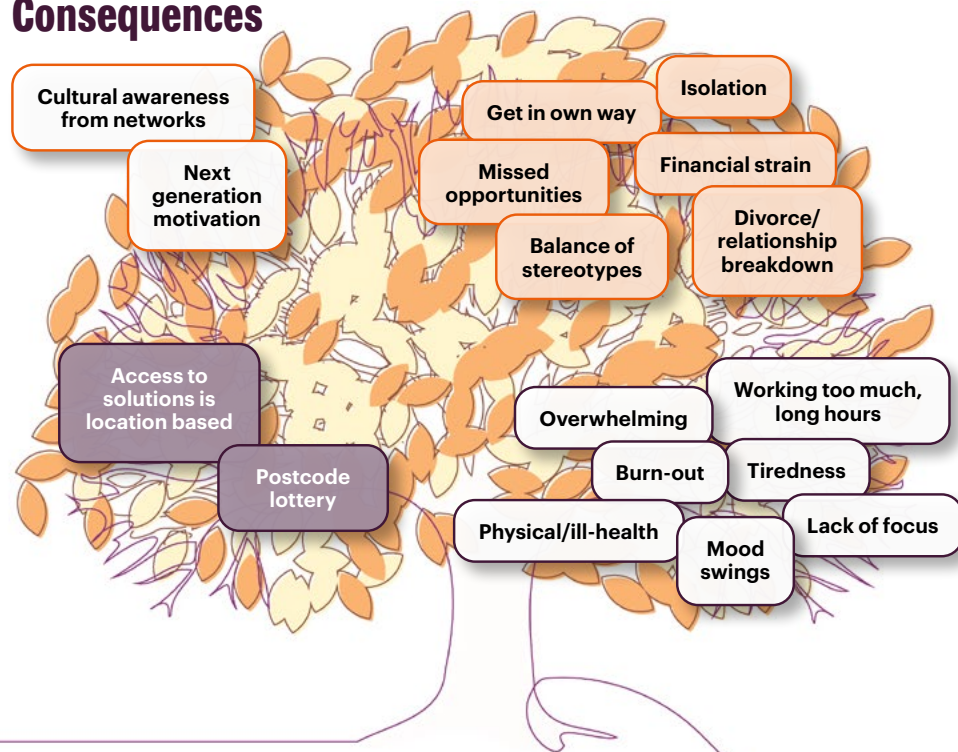
Also identified as root causes of the challenge of balancing work with family/life commitments is the lack of infrastructure for caring. This is demonstrated through limited childcare and adult social care.

Menopause is also identified as a root cause of this challenge. Menopause can impact a woman's ability to balance work and family life in several ways, most notably through changing energy levels and decreased concentration leading to lower productivity. This exists alongside the emotional and psychological effects of menopause.

This all exists alongside the perception of the female entrepreneur as not having a 'real job'.

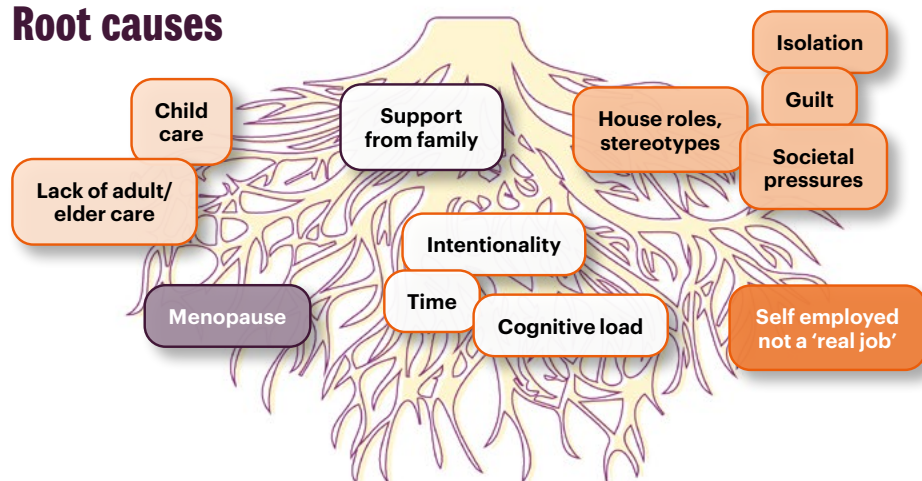
9 From survey completed as part of this research. Q. When thinking specifically about growth and scaling your business(es), what barriers, if any, have you experienced?

Consequences



MANAGING FAMILY/LIFE COMMITMENTS

Root causes



SHIFTING AMBITIONS REFLECT FAMILY LIFE

As the life cycle evolves, so too do the motivations and priorities for businesses. Women start businesses in part to support their family, facilitate a lifestyle or because they are pushed out of employment.

Interviews demonstrate that in the initial stages, there is a key need for businesses to be sustainable and to support the woman and her family.

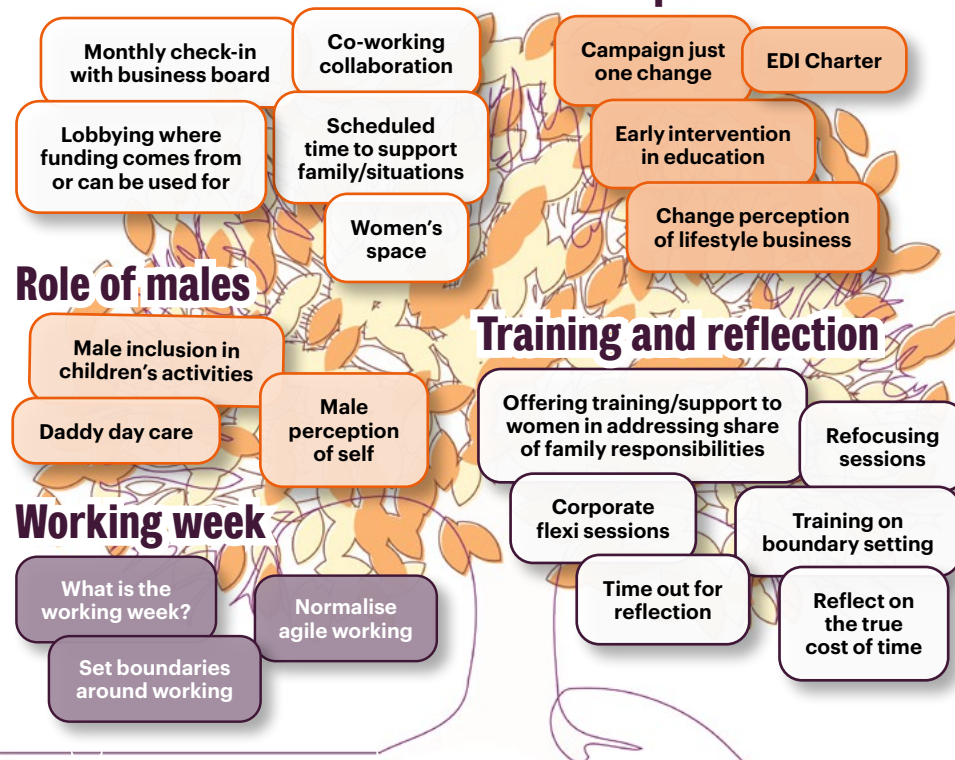
“Have I had enough money coming in that we could pay the mortgage and do all of that, and we had food and all that kind of stuff. That’s what success felt like to me at the very beginning. It’s different now because I’ve got people working for me. So, success now is a different story, but at the very beginning, when it was just me, I didn’t know what was going to be here at this point.” **COASTAL ENTREPRENEUR**

A woman may enter self-employment for greater autonomy to meet familial responsibilities such as rearing their children. However, as children get older and perhaps need less full-time parenting, the women may be able to reprioritise her responsibilities and reflect on business goal such as increasing her business profit and having more free time to scale-up her business, if she wishes. The lived experiences of those who took part in this research also demonstrates the juggling caring responsibilities of other family members that may occur following or during child raising. Of course, much is dependent on other supports in place such as the family unit, local services or the availability of finances.

The life cycles of women often parallel the evolution of their businesses, as their ambitions and support requirements change with each phase. The autonomy to control these shifting ambitions and to have the business fit around their lives is key.

“I think it’s having that flexibility of support, saying about ambition, women’s ambition might change over a number of years. So my ambition was very different when my kids were four, five, and seven to where they are now when they’re all in their teens.” **CITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Create



“ I think the challenge is multiple life cycles of your business because as you say, you're wanting different things at different times because you've got different needs around you, and different hopes and expectations as you go through different phases of your own life, and potentially your partner or your children's lives, or your parents' lives.”
CITY ENTREPRENEUR

MANAGING FAMILY/LIFE COMMITMENTS

There are a range of consequences identified. Strain is a primary consequence. While strain takes the form of physical and mental ill-health there is also a strain on work. This is evident in situations where opportunities are missed due to self-imposed barriers. There is also financial strain, likely experienced from lack of time to business plan, manage finances and the need to provide a salary for their family.

Consequences identified include a desire to want change for the next generation of women entrepreneurs. This can be present through networks and information sharing.



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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Enterprise Works

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