

# Aotearoa Centre for Enterprising Women research snapshots

Unlocking the entrepreneurial potential  
of women in Aotearoa New Zealand  
through research and education.

No. 4

## Igniting Capabilities of Women Export Entrepreneurs in Aotearoa/New Zealand

### Part II: Thematic Analysis and Recommendations

[Part I](#) of this pair of snapshots summarises the first half of a report\* by the Aotearoa Centre for Enterprising Women and New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) on interviews with 20 successful women export entrepreneurs. The second half, captured here, analyses two key themes and recommends policies to tap more potential of such entrepreneurs in Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ).

Underlying both themes – interviewees’ motivations and their collaborations – was the power of “female capital” to turn gender barriers into springboards. One motivator was taking control of their lives. Control required building self-belief and recasting challenges as opportunities to grow confidence. That way, sometimes the glass ceiling on a corporate career became the window onto an entrepreneurial one; colleagues’ sexist scepticism steered career-leavers for the scrutiny put on start-ups; and “time out” for child-raising was grist to the entrepreneurial mill: one mother even commercialised a homemade waterproof bedding protector. Another form of female capital defied conventional advice by sensing, albeit without always immediately seizing, the opportunity to “go global from day 1”. Some such opportunities were digital. One company exported a sophisticated financial product in fully digital form, since arbitrage experts told the founder no one would be able to sell it domestically. Women also aimed their non-financial capital like education or networks at global environmental or social needs, like the highly qualified friends who created and exported a recyclable plastic to fight the plague of waste from single-use bags.

Collaboration proved key, both more so and in different ways than for men. Women’s ties, which extended online to Facebook or Twitter groups and blogging, were looser, nurturing relationships based on shared values of trust, cooperation and reciprocity. While interviewees collaborated mainly with other women, nearly half mentioned support or mentoring from a male “ally”. What women lacked, though, was networks of information. Struggling to access market research or basics like Ministry of Primary Industry requirements, many reached out for information via social networks.

The thematic synthesis of interviews complements NZTE’s showcasing of individual success stories via podcasts, seminars, and networking events, and policy steps it has already taken. It reaffirms the need to tackle female underconfidence and hesitance or unfamiliarity over investment; and sexist perceptions by some institutional funders. It also affirms NZTE’s highlighting of allies outside the firm, but spotlights male allies as aids to finance, growth and expansion. Men’s IT knowledge could unlock global digital commerce to women with strengths in innovation and creative marketing of, say, digital wearables, eBooks and software programmes. The report suggests NZTE identify male business leaders and friendly entrepreneurs more formally than women’s informal networks do and offer education about allyship and gender barriers. But it stresses that women entrepreneurs need to be shown the power of female capital. To “ignite” the gendered capabilities these interviewees typify, policy should embrace what export enterprise means to women in A/NZ, which often goes beyond economic gain to social change.

Last, no one policy size fits the needs of all entrepreneurs or even all female entrepreneurs. The needs of wāhine Māori exporters are overdue for investigation. Migrant women’s ventures could be wrapped into Immigration New Zealand’s refresh of the NZ Migrant Settlement Integration Strategy and NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy. And “blind” financial risk assessment in start-up funding could boost equity and inclusion and reduce poverty by empowering not only women and ethnic minorities but also, for example, other gender-diverse groups and people with health problems.

\* The full report “Igniting Capabilities of Women Export Entrepreneurs” by Dr Susan Nemeč, Anna Guenther, Professor Christine Woods and Jess Chilcott, May 2023 (16 pp) is available [here](#).