



DO BUSINESS LIKE A WOMAN

A NEW BREED OF ENTREPRENEURS

By IMD Professor Vanina Farber and Natalia Olyneć

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

A new breed of entrepreneurs are establishing businesses that also create cultural change benefitting women's professional development. They recognize societal barriers to women's career advancement, such as cognitive biases or obligations around child or eldercare, often through their own professional experiences. While government and corporate policies addressing these imbalances have advanced, these innovators are filling the gaps through business models that smooth the unique paths women must forge to flourish in their careers.

While the age of artificial intelligence and digitization places greater value on stereotypically feminine traits such as emotional intelligence, structural barriers to women's leadership in the workforce remain solidly in place. Women's careers develop in a clearly gendered space. They are chronically underrepresented in top teams and boardrooms, face wage gaps, secure lower amounts of venture capital funding than male peers, and frequently contend with both subtle and blatant forms of sexual harassment.

That's where these female social innovators step in. Through their personal experiences they are able to address the structural challenges unique to a woman's career – and they approach the challenge from a specifically female perspective.

Balancing like a woman

Research shows working women do the majority of what has become known as the '[second shift](#)', a larger share of housework than their partners. They also bear the brunt of the 'mental load' of the planning required to run a home and family, as described in Susan Walzer's research [article](#) "Thinking About the Baby". Small tasks like grocery shopping and laundry can easily sap energy that could be spent on professional pursuits and many women jokingly fantasize about 'having a wife'. Marcela Sapone's company [Hello Alfred](#) recognizes this challenge and sends a personal assistant, who can clean, shop, organize, and handle other errands for a small monthly fee.

Scaling business like a woman

Investor gender bias was documented in a recent [study](#) of start-up pitches delivered by either female or male entrepreneurs with similar qualifications and backgrounds. Investors tend to ask men development-focused questions while they ask women risk-prevention-focused questions, resulting in higher funding offered to men. While female entrepreneurs have the potential to create impact, scaling a business successfully requires access to resources and relationships which is not balanced in terms of gender equity. Barriers to access keep many women from launching high-growth startups. To bridge the gap, Lisa Wang's company [SheWorx](#) seeks to redefine what female leaders can accomplish, helping provide support systems, mentors, and knowledge through a growing network and events.

Managing transitions like a woman

Despite corporate claims of family-oriented policies and non-discriminatory hiring practices, economists show [evidence](#) of age bias, and women taking a career break to care for children or elderly parents face substantial hurdles re-entering the workforce. Carol Fishman Cohen and her company iRelaunch consults with dozens of large firms, including IBM and Bloomberg, to tap into this market of highly qualified women. She knows about the challenge of corporate re-entry first hand. Cohen, a mother of four, restarted her career at Bain Capital after an 11 year child-care break, a journey later examined in a Harvard Business School [case](#).

Investing like a woman

Consider the reality that many women reach their highest pay levels at an earlier age than men, take several career breaks for family reasons, and live longer. Sallie Krawcheck, who rose through the ranks of Citigroup and Bank of America as one of the leading women on Wall Street, recently closed a new round of funding for [Ellevest](#), an online investing platform tailored to women's specific needs. For example, it accounts for that fact that with longer life spans women have different risk profiles. It also uses salary curves geared to the fluctuations and interruptions typically seen in women's careers that slow wage growth.

These examples show that by applying a gender lens to business innovation we can both help dismantle the structural barriers to women's advancement and identify business opportunities. Longstanding gender norms cripple women's career development. These unique business models forged by women acknowledge the entrenched imbalances in the workplace and are playing a critical role in building the path for equity.

[Professor Vanina Farber](#) holds the elea Chair for Social Innovation at IMD Business School.

Natalia Olyne is senior writer and researcher at IMD's CEO Learning Center.