

# Women in business have come a

By Gody Niosi *Writer*

Women in business have come a long way – and they still have some distance to go.

Helping them get to a place where they share equal opportunities with men are a number of strong and respected local and national organizations.

The Canadian Federation of Business & Professional Women's (BFW) clubs is one of the oldest and most esteemed organizations in Canada and is also part of an international organization with a presence in over 100 countries.

The organization's motto is simple: "Women working for working women."

Connie Friesen, president of BFW BC and Yukon explains that the organization works toward improving economic, political, social and employment conditions for women. Members come from all walks of life, particularly from the professions and the corporate world, including business owners.

The organization is known for networking, personal development, mentoring of younger women, developing leadership skills and advocacy.

Friesen explains, "We are involved in advocacy to create policy or law changes on either the provincial or federal level or internationally through the United Nations.

EPW was chartered in Canada in 1930. Women have come a long way since then, Friesen says.

"This organization was very involved in getting women the right to vote and making them legal persons – all that sort of thing. So women have come a long way. Are we where we need to be? No – not yet. Women are still earning about 70 per-

cent of what a male does."

She says that one of the best ways to effect change is politically but more women have to become involved in order to have substantial influence on both the national and provincial level.

She says the biggest challenge women face today in advancing their careers is child care. Many don't have access to good child care and as a result, they often drop off the corporate fast track and start their own businesses, often at home where they control their time and have the flexibility they need.

Friesen says, "What's interesting is that as a percentage, women are starting far more businesses than men are and they're far more successful. And that seems to be because they are a lot more conservative with their spending."

Women in the corporate world still hit the glass ceiling, she says. Looking at the Fortune 500 companies, very few women are at the top in those organizations. They may hold vice presidential positions, Friesen says, or they may be heads of departments, but rarely are they the CEO. That said, things are changing, she says. Younger men and women expect more equality, not only at work but, in who does the household chores after work. Real change has to start with attitude, she says.

BPW's vision states, "To achieve a just and equal status for women at all levels and areas of society where decisions are taken in true partnership with men based on mutual respect for a more balanced and peaceful world."

"I really like that," Friesen says. "That's my vision too – men and women working to-

gether and making a better society."

Mindi Pettitt, vice president of the Nanaimo Women's Business Network on Vancouver Island says that most women are looking toward becoming a better society.

In fact, she says that's one of the things that sets women in business apart from men. Women tend to be focussed on contribution first and making money second, at least in the smaller communities in British Columbia. Vancouver tends to be the home of large corporations and the pace for both men and women to climb that ladder. In communities such as Kelowna, Prince George, Nanaimo and even smaller towns like Smithers, Port Alberni and Salmon Arm, women tend to start their own business, many of them working from home.

The Nanaimo Women's Business Network, like similar groups throughout the province, focuses chiefly on networking and relationship building and has a large membership of business owners and independent business women.

Talking about challenges women business owners face, Pettitt says, "I think it's been a man's world for so long that breaking into that and doing

business with business men who are still in the majority, can be a challenge."

She adds that business is being done differently and women may have the advantage today.

"I think a lot of women are in their own business because they want to get more out of life. They start a business that they really believe in and they really want to help people or make life better for people. They generally choose businesses that will allow them to do that."

She says the biggest challenge facing women today still, the old one of juggling family with career. Most choose family and let their career suffer. Working from home gives women the best alternative, she says and in smaller communities that can really pay off.

Tami Reilly, Chair of the Women Business Owners Association of the Lower Mainland of BC has a story similar to that of many women who own their own business. When she had a child she faced the choice of going back to work and having less time with her child or starting her own business for the flexibility and increased hours it would give her for her family.

"Women often start businesses for different reasons than