

Cross-Party Group on Women in Enterprise: Women's Health in Entrepreneurship

17th September 2025 7.00 - 8.15pm

Minute

Present

Carolyn Currie
Sophie Rooney
Suzanne Doyle-Morris
Joise Saunders
Lynne Cadenhead
Ailsa Clark
Ann Johnson
Annabelle Beckwith
Anne-Marie Morrison
Antoinette Fionda-Douglas
Ayse Basak Cinar-Lowe
Claire Smith
Claudia Duffy
Gail Bryden
Gaynor Simpson
Karen Fullerton-Chalmers
Wendy Wu
Zoe Borland
Julie Semple

MSPs

Michelle Thomson MSP

Invited guests

Non-MSP Group Members

Apologies

Welcome and opening

Michelle Thomson MSP welcomes everyone to meeting.

AGM postponed

Michelle Thomson MSP introduces first speaker.

Speaker 1 – Suzanne Doyle Morris

- Has spent 20 years supporting senior women in male-dominated fields
- I was asked by WES to interview women about mental health.
- We chose a very specific group for the study:
 - WES Ambassadors with at least 10 years in business.
 - Award winners who often appear in the media or speak at conferences.
 - Women aged 35–60.
 - Founders who had secured funding such as EDGE, SMART or sector awards.
- The idea was “looking at the swans” — women who appear calm and successful but may be struggling underneath.
- All these women who were interviewed would typically be seen as “success stories”
- Myth 1: Female founders are bouncing back from COVID
 - Many of the women interviewed are not bouncing back; they are still struggling post-COVID.
 - Interviewees readily agreed to participate because they rarely get to speak openly about mental health.
 - Interviews often ran far longer than planned as women “unloaded” what was really happening.
 - Every woman identified with at least half of the burnout symptoms I presented to them.
- Myth 2: Mental health and funding are separate issues
 - Funding stress and mental health stress are interconnected.
 - Women feel exhausted by constantly having to “prove” inequities in the funding system despite long-standing evidence.
 - Some described being gaslit by investors, agencies or boards
 - I observed that founders with external funding experienced more burnout than those who bootstrapped, due to investor expectations, loan pressures and boards sidelining the founder.
- Myth 3: Government and third-sector support reaches those who need it most
 - Current support tends to focus on start-up bootcamps and equity-focused scale-up programmes.

- This leaves out established female-led businesses that are viable, employ staff and contribute significantly, but are not pursuing external investment.
- A quote from a founder who was interviewed was about government support focusing on “unicorns” while overlooking “workhorse” businesses that grow sustainably but receive little backing.
- Recommendation:
 - Funding reforms that address structural inequities in the funding ecosystem and provide sustainable support for established female-led businesses.
 - A founder’s comment:

“It is completely unethical of Scottish Government to encourage women to go for external investment until this broken and discriminatory funding ecosystem is sorted out.”

Comments and Questions

Annabelle Beckwith:

- There is an unhelpful obsession with ‘unicorns’. Micro-businesses and those that “scale deep” have huge community impact and still doesn’t receive the recognition or funding it deserves.
- From my work designing entrepreneurial programmes, you see women arriving with impostor syndrome or burnout, only to realise others feel the same. Once the façade drops, women are very good at supporting each other, and these informal peer networks are vital for wellbeing, confidence, and coping with funding setbacks or dismissive investors.

Contributor:

- One participant shared that, despite leading a long-running and successful business, she feels deeply unhappy because of persistent sexism.
- What keeps her going is the support of a local network of women who’ve had similar experiences and understand the pressures she’s under.

Antoinette Fionda-Douglas:

- Part of the burnout comes from the fact that we’ve become very good at getting women to start businesses but once you move past start-up and try to grow, the help becomes very limited. Women are trying to build micro businesses into something bigger, but the barriers are huge, and it can feel like we’re being set up to fail.
- We’ve been promised change ever since the Rose Review, but we’re really not much further on. We’ve nailed start-up support but now we need proper

support for the next stages. The recent WES report, especially the attrition rates, makes that clear.

Ailsa Clark

- I think women struggle because we don't ask for or accept help. I'm running a business, a household, caring for parents, and raising kids, and I just take it all on. Men are better at outsourcing or delegating. If we're CEOs trying to grow a business, we need to do the same at home and at work.

Speaker 2 – Karen Fullerton-Chalmers

- When Suzanne shared burnout symptoms, I thought about how stalking victims I work with would relate to all of them.
- I work for Action Against Stalking, the only Scottish charity supporting stalking victims and survivors. We provide free, care and support across Scotland and the UK.
- Key Research & Findings
 - This year, I focused on stalking as a public health issue.
 - I submitted Freedom of Information requests to all 14 NHS regional boards, asking:
 - Do you have a specific stalking policy?
 - Are there procedures if someone discloses stalking?
 - Can I access copies of these policies?
 - I found no NHS board had comprehensive stalking policies; mentions of stalking were buried in other documents.
 - Stalking is a standalone crime, not just bullying or harassment, and can include online, neighbour, stranger, or youth-related stalking.
 - Victims often endure 100+ incidents before reporting.
- Recommendations & Impact
 - Standalone stalking policies, or strengthened integration into existing policies.
 - Policies need training and support for management so they feel empowered to handle disclosures.
 - Protecting staff also protects organisational reputation.
 - As a result, stalking is now included as a keyword in NHS systems, allowing staff to make referrals and access guidance.
- Wider Roll Out
 - I am now replicating this work with local authorities across Scotland to raise national awareness.
 - 11% of adults in Scotland experience harassment each year, and stalking charges are rising by 11%.
 - Full report is online

Comments and Questions

Contributor:

- Participant shared an experience where a job candidate disclosed she was being stalked, which left the employer unsure how to keep their small team safe. It highlighted how unprepared many workplaces are for situations like this and how important proper guidance and training for employers would be—ideally supported at government level.

Sudha Mani: Question for Karen Fullerton-Chalmers

- A lot of stalking starts through social media, how do you tackle this?

Karen Fullerton-Chalmers: Answer for Sudha Mani

- Victims should never block a stalker, even online, because it destroys evidence and can escalate the stalker's behaviour. For online stalking, giving the victim a new SIM for trusted contacts while keeping the old one accessible for evidence, allows them to stay safe without being retraumatised.

Clair Smith

- My organisation supports micro, small, medium, and social enterprises, often through mentoring and self-employed contractors. Karen's talk on stalking had made her rethink risk assessments for lone working, particularly for her mostly female team. The 11% figure likely underestimates the true scale.

Closing Remarks

The Convener thanked all speakers and members for joining meeting.