

# BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING FUTURES:

Women Entrepreneurs  
as Catalysts for  
Sustainable Growth

Research by



This project is funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



Women and Gender  
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des genres Canada

## PREFACE:

The Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC) is a not-for-profit, national centre of expertise for strengthening Canada's digital advantage in a global economy. Through trusted research, practical policy advice, and creative capacity-building programs, ICTC fosters globally competitive Canadian industries enabled by innovative and diverse digital talent. In partnership with an expansive network of industry leaders, academic partners, and policymakers from across Canada, ICTC has empowered a robust and inclusive digital economy for over 30 years.

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# BACKGROUND

This report is part of a multi-year project that is funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) and aims to enhance gender diversity within Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem. This report, "Breaking Barriers and Building Futures: Women Entrepreneurs Catalysts for Sustainable Growth" examines the state of gender diversity in Canada's entrepreneurial landscape and digital economy, identifies common barriers that women entrepreneurs face, and highlights practical strategies and solutions to increase gender diversity among Canadian entrepreneurs. The findings and insights from this report inform and contribute to the ICTC's Changing the Narrative—Unleashing the Full Potential of Women-Owned Enterprises program, which is designed to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder the success of women-owned social enterprises in Canada's digital economy. The initiative fosters a supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs with a particular focus on Black women, equity deserving women, and women who are part of official language minority (OLM) communities.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reducing barriers to entrepreneurship and increasing the number of Canadian entrepreneurs can provide benefits to the Canadian economy. Entrepreneurs drive job creation, innovation, and economic growth and can play a crucial role in advancing social development and sustainability. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) comprise nearly all employing businesses in Canada and employ a large proportion of the private-sector labour force.

In addition to contributing to GDP, there is growing recognition of the impact that women entrepreneurs can have on social and environmental outcomes, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) or Canada's net-zero objectives, with women entrepreneurs being more likely to prioritize

sustainability initiatives. Supporting women's entrepreneurship in digital and sustainability-focused initiatives could yield high returns for the Canadian economy and society.

Despite constituting almost half of Canada's workforce, women are underrepresented in Canadian entrepreneurship. Although there has been an increase in the number of women-owned businesses in recent years, a persistent gender gap in Canadian business ownership remains. Canada's entrepreneurial gender gap has socio-economic consequences. Enabling more women to become entrepreneurs could yield significant increases in Canadian GDP, making women entrepreneurs critical to fostering Canada's economic development.



Common barriers to entrepreneurship for women stem from pervasive gender stereotypes, biases, and societal expectations. Entrepreneurship is often perceived as a man's domain, and because of this, women entrepreneurs often experience pressure to suppress feminine traits or conform to masculine norms in order to be successful. Women also tend to have fewer networking opportunities with other entrepreneurs of the same gender and are more likely than men to experience challenges related to work-life balance. For women of colour, racial discrimination is also rampant.

Limited access to capital is a significant hurdle for women entrepreneurs. Due to gender biases, women often encounter more skepticism from investors than men and tend to receive smaller bank loans. Women entrepreneurs also often struggle with low self-confidence and imposter syndrome and tend to under evaluate the quality of their own skills, products, and services, particularly in industries dominated by men. These tendencies can significantly impact business decisions and interactions with business stakeholders, such as investors and clients.

While many support programs for women entrepreneurs exist, they tend to focus on mentorship and frequently fail to address the financial needs of women entrepreneurs. Many

women entrepreneurs report feeling over-mentored but underfunded. Programs often lack substantial financial support and inadequately assist women entrepreneurs in scaling their businesses. Programs that do offer financial support can impose restrictive eligibility criteria.

These multi-level challenges create substantial barriers for women entrepreneurs, hindering their growth and success. The obstacles are further compounded for women from equity-deserving groups, such as Black women entrepreneurs, who face intersecting gender and racial biases throughout the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Support for women entrepreneurs must also consider not only gender but also other forms of identity, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. Intersectional identities shape the experiences of women entrepreneurs and can compound challenges to starting and scaling their businesses. As an example, Black women entrepreneurs can experience race-based discrimination in addition to other barriers typically faced by women entrepreneurs. Adopting an intersectional approach is crucial for understanding and addressing the unique challenges and barriers that women entrepreneurs face and creating opportunities for women from equity-deserving groups.

**This report details six strategies that can be used to boost women's participation in entrepreneurship and to achieve a more diverse and inclusive entrepreneurial landscape:**

1. Improve access to capital through alternative financing mechanisms, tax incentives for women-led businesses, and expanded angel investor presence in women-focused entrepreneurial spaces.
2. Ensure support programs are targeted, flexible, and address intersectional barriers.
3. Foster networking and mentorship opportunities specifically for women.
4. Combat gender stereotypes through education and media campaigns.
5. Help women develop essential skills like digital literacy, marketing, sales, and financial management.
6. Meet childcare needs by implementing maternity leave for entrepreneurs and subsidizing daycare.

This report also outlines key priorities related to skills training for women entrepreneurs, as identified by interviewees. The interviewees' key priorities in each of several categories included leveraging digital tools, developing marketing skills, developing general business administrative skills, and maintaining mental health and work-life balance.

# INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which account for nearly 99.8% of employer businesses and 67.7 % of the private-sector labor force, are important contributors to the Canadian economy.<sup>1</sup> Increasing the number of profitable SMEs and growing these businesses through investment and support would yield positive socio-economy outcomes for Canada.<sup>2</sup>

One factor that limits the impact of SMEs on the Canadian economy is the entrepreneurial gender gap. Globally, women are less likely than men to intend to start a business, start a business, and be established business owners.<sup>3</sup> Women in high-income countries are less likely than men to be involved in nascent business activity or own an active nascent or established business.<sup>4</sup> In Canada, women are not only less likely than men to engage in startup activity, but also personally know an entrepreneur or be a business investor.<sup>5</sup>

While the percentage of women-owned businesses has increased slightly in recent years, women are still underrepresented in entrepreneurship and continue face challenges when starting and sustaining their businesses.<sup>6</sup>

Canada's entrepreneurial gender gap represents a missed opportunity for job creation, innovation, and overall economic expansion. Closing it could yield substantial socio-economic benefits for Canada.<sup>7</sup> For example, a 2017 study by McKinsey estimated

that closing Canada's entrepreneurial gender gap could contribute CAD 150 billion in incremental GDP to the Canadian economy by 2026, or a 0.6 percent increase in annual GDP growth.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to their economic impact, women entrepreneurs could help Canada achieve its net-zero and sustainable development goals.<sup>9</sup> For example, SMEs account for approximately 41% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions and will play a significant role in meeting Canada's sustainability commitments. Research by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor finds that women are more likely than men to practice social and environmental sustainability in their business and prioritize sustainability over economic gains.<sup>10</sup>

BMO meanwhile reports that women entrepreneurs are more likely to integrate economic, social, and environmental sustainability goals into their business objectives, make choices that enhance environmental sustainability and conservation, and establish a sustainability-oriented organizational culture.<sup>11</sup> Other studies have similarly found a strong link between corporate SDG commitments and women leadership, with 58% of sustainability executives at large companies being women.<sup>12</sup>

From a social perspective, women entrepreneurs enact social change by prioritizing community engagement and sustainability in their business practices, and by inspiring other women to

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- 1 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "SME Profile: Ownership Demographics Statistics," January 20, 2020, <https://isded-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/research-reports/sme-profile-ownership-demographics-statistics/sme-profile-ownership-demographics-statistics>.
  - 2 Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2023," June 27, 2023, <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2023/>.
  - 3 GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, "New GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report Underscores Breaking Stereotypes and Seizing Opportunities," 2023, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/reports/womens-entrepreneurship>.
  - 4 Ibid.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 Ibid.
  - 7 OECD, "Entrepreneurship Policies through a Gender Lens," OECD Studies on SMEs and Entrepreneurship, May 17, 2021, [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/entrepreneurship-policies-through-the-gender-lens\\_71c8f9c9-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/entrepreneurship-policies-through-the-gender-lens_71c8f9c9-en.html).
  - 8 Sandrine Devillard et al., "The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Canada" (McKinsey Global Institute, June 2017), <https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Women%20matter/The%20power%20of%20parity%20Advancing%20womens%20equality%20in%20Canada/MGI-The-power-of-parity-Advancing-womens-equality-in-Canada-Executive-summary.pdf>, 2.
  - 9 Environment and Climate Change Canada, "Government of Canada Legislates Climate Accountability with First Net-Zero Emissions Law," June 30, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2021/06/government-of-canada-legislates-climate-accountability-with-first-net-zero-emissions-law.html>.
  - 10 GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, "New GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report Underscores Breaking Stereotypes and Seizing Opportunities," 2023, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/reports/womens-entrepreneurship>.
  - 11 Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub and BMO, "BMO Celebrating Women Grant Program 2021: Women Business Owners and Their Contributions to Sustainability - Executive Summary," November 18, 2021, <https://wekh.ca/research/bmo-celebrating-women-grant-program-2021-executive-summary>.
  - 12 Bronagh Loughlin, "Enhancing Women's Leadership in Sustainable Business Planning," Institute of Sustainability Studies (blog), January 13, 2023, <https://instituteofsustainabilitystudies.com/insights/guides/female-entrepreneurs-are-increasingly-dominating-the-sustainability-space/>.



achieve greater economic empowerment and independence.<sup>13</sup> They are also more likely than men to start and own businesses in sectors with high social impact, including government, health, education, and social services.<sup>14</sup>

These statistics showcase the potential socio-economic benefits that supporting and empowering women entrepreneurs could achieve. Women entrepreneurs drive social and economic growth, foster innovation, create jobs, and enhance Canada's competitiveness in the global marketplace.<sup>15</sup> Canada has the potential to unleash a new wave of economic development and social gains by funding initiatives that encourage and enable more women to start and grow a business.

To advance gender equality in entrepreneurship and help grow Canada's women-owned businesses, the Government of Canada has invested nearly \$7 billion into the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy.<sup>16</sup> As of 2022, the WES has provided 9,000 loans and conducted 860+ networking and learning events for women entrepreneurs. To continue fostering gender equality in Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is imperative to understand how effective existing supports for women entrepreneurs are, and which barriers still need to be addressed. Understanding the state of women's entrepreneurship in Canada will enable stakeholders at all levels to make well-informed and evidence-based decisions that support the inclusion of women in the economy.

**This study uses secondary findings from academic research and primary insights from women entrepreneurs and industry experts to provide an overview of gender equity in Canada's entrepreneurship ecosystem. It is informed by an extensive literature review and 30 key informant interviews (KIIs) with women entrepreneurs and individuals working for organizations that support women entrepreneurs. The report is structured as follows:**

**Section I** begins by identifying the current state and representation of women in the economy and in entrepreneurship and illustrating a profile of women entrepreneurs, their businesses, and the Canadian economy. It also details the opportunity that increasing women entrepreneurship holds, with a focus on women's potential contribution to Canada's sustainable development goals and digital adoption.

**Section II** describes the ecosystem-wide, organizational, and individual barriers that limit women entrepreneurs in achieving their full entrepreneurial potential. It also offers solutions to these barriers, where adequate evidence exists.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, "New GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report Underscores Breaking Stereotypes and Seizing Opportunities," 2023, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/reports/womens-entrepreneurship>.

<sup>15</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2024," July 31, 2024, [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WEKH\\_The-State-of-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-Canada-2024.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WEKH_The-State-of-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-Canada-2024.pdf), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Huju Liu, "Research Blog: Women-Owned Businesses in Canada," Statistics Canada, April 3, 2019, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/blog/cs/wob>.





## SECTION I:

# THE STATE OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CANADA

Women make up a growing portion of the Canadian workforce and play an ever-important role in building Canadian businesses. Yet women account for a disproportionately low percentage of Canadian employment and Canadian entrepreneurs. This section dives into this topic, providing more information about Canada's economic gender gap and detailing the state of women's employment and entrepreneurship in Canada.



# THE STATE OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN CANADA

While the percentage of Canadian women who are employed has steadily grown over the last several decades, a lower percentage of Canadian women are employed than Canadian men. According to Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey, 87% of men aged 25 to 54 were employed in 2024, yet this figure was just 81% for women aged 25 to 54.<sup>17</sup>

Women also account for a disproportionately lower percentage of Canadian employment. Despite making up almost half of Canada's population, women account for just 43.1% of private sector employees.<sup>18</sup> Canada's gender employment gap is even more pronounced in specific types of roles, such as self-employed positions, senior executive and board positions, senior management positions, roles in Canada's digital economy, and technology occupations.

## Self-employment:

In 2022, nearly one million Canadian women were self-employed.<sup>19</sup> Women accounted for 37% of Canada's total self-employed population that year, despite making up about half of Canada's population.<sup>20</sup>

## Senior Executive and Board Positions:

In 2020, women held just 20.5% of Board of Director seats and 23.7% of senior executive roles within publicly traded corporations, privately held corporations and government business enterprises operating across a variety of industries in Canada, including positions such as chairpersons, presidents, vice presidents, and executive vice presidents.<sup>21</sup>

## Senior Management Positions:

In 2024, women accounted for 47.4% of senior management positions and 47.2% of all other management positions at private sector businesses while men accounted for 52.6% and 52.8% respectively (see [Figure 1](#)). Statistics Canada data suggests that women's representation in senior positions is stronger in women-owned businesses than it is in the private sector overall. In 2024, women accounted for approximately 73.5% of senior management positions and 68.2% of all other management positions within women-owned businesses.<sup>22</sup> This data demonstrates the positive impact of women's leadership has on gender diversity within organizations.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Tam, Shivani Sood, and Chris Johnston, "Analysis on Majority Women-Owned Businesses, First Quarter of 2024," Statistics Canada, March 8, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-621-m/11-621-m2024001-eng.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Sharanjit Uppal, "Self-Employment among Women in Canada," Statistics Canada, December 4, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00014-eng.htm>.

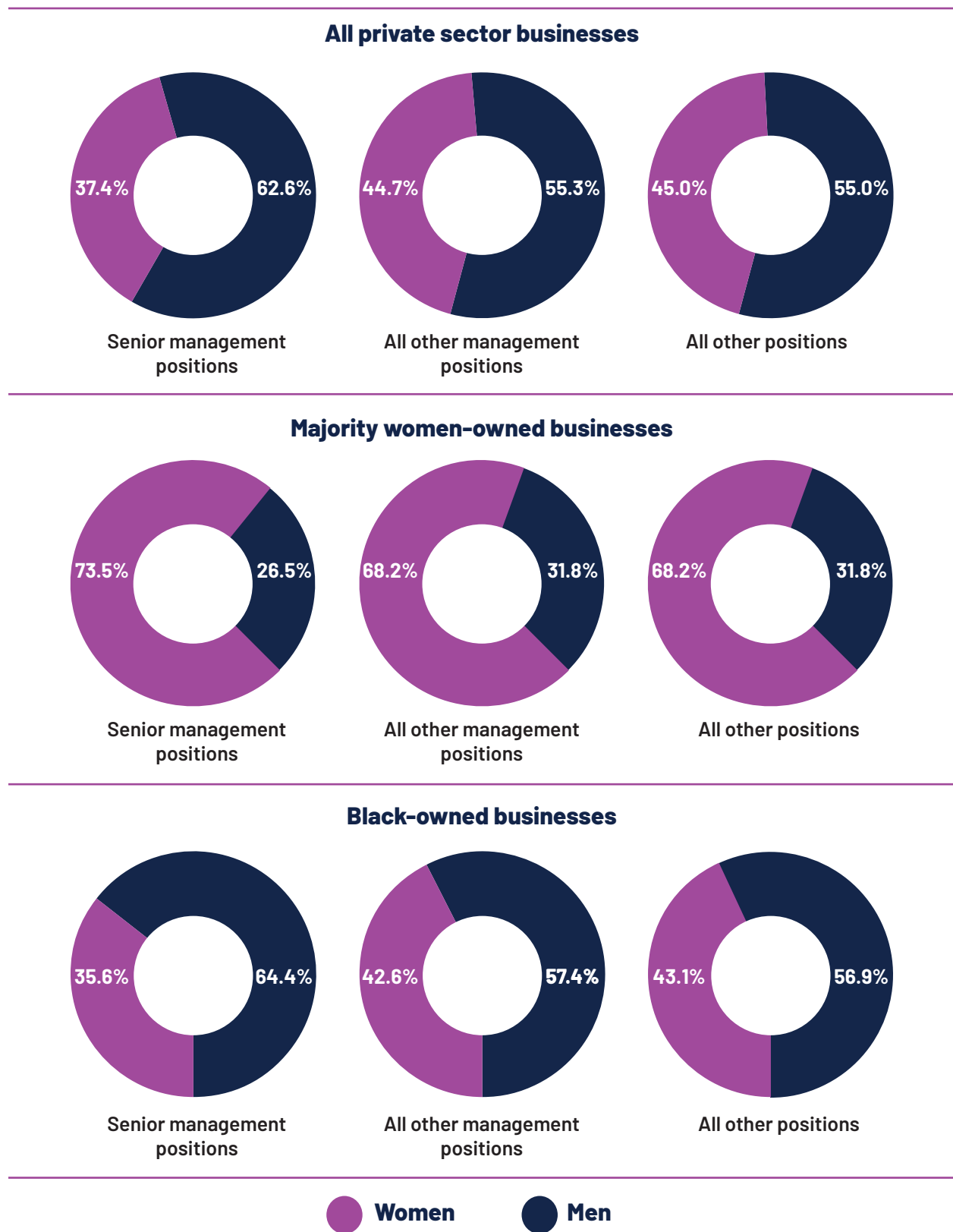
<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Statistics Canada, "The Daily – Representation of Women on Boards of Directors and in Officer Positions, 2020," May 29, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230529/dq230529b-eng.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0791-01 Average Percentage of Women and Men in Management Positions, First Quarter of 2024," February 26, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310079101>.



**Figure 1: Snapshot of Women's Representation in the Economy**



**Source:** Statistics Canada, Table 33-10-0791-01, Average percentage of women and men in management positions, first quarter of 2024.

## Employment in Canada's Digital Economy:

Canada's digital economy encompasses all workers employed within Canada's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector (including in both technology-related and non-technology-related roles) and all workers employed in technology-related occupations in industries outside of tech, such as healthcare or agriculture. Over the past 10 years, there has been a steady, though gradual, increase in the presence of women in Canada's digital economy, in part due to the stronger representation of women in technology-related roles. From 2014 to 2024, the percentage of digital economy roles occupied by women rose from 29.1% to 32.6%.

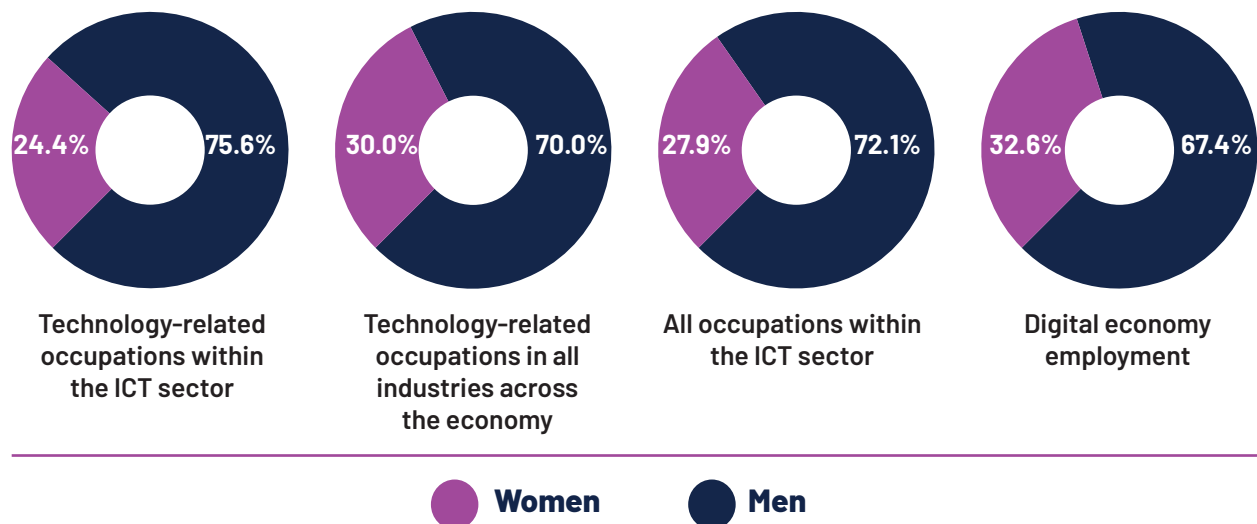
## Technology Occupations:

Women have long been underrepresented in technology-related occupations, both within Canada's ICT sector and in other industries across the economy. In 2014, women accounted for just 25.7% of employment in technology-related occupations across the Canadian economy. Though this figure has improved, rising to 30% in 2024, it still has far to go—as noted previously, women account for 43.1% of Canada's private-sector employment and should represent a similar proportion of Canada's technology-related roles.

Women appear to be finding more opportunities in technology-related positions outside of traditional tech companies. As seen in Figure 2, women accounted for just 24.4% of technology-related positions in Canada's ICT sector, as compared to 30% of technology-related positions across the economy. As technology continues to permeate various industries, it will continuously create new opportunities for women to enter and thrive in tech-related roles and grow their presence in the digital economy.

**Figure 2: Women Representation in the ICT Workforce, 2024**

### Representation of Women vs. Men in Canada's Digital Economy, 2024



**Source:** Statistics Canada, LFS Monthly data, 2024, ICTC calculations.



# THE STATE OF WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS OWNERSHIP IN CANADA

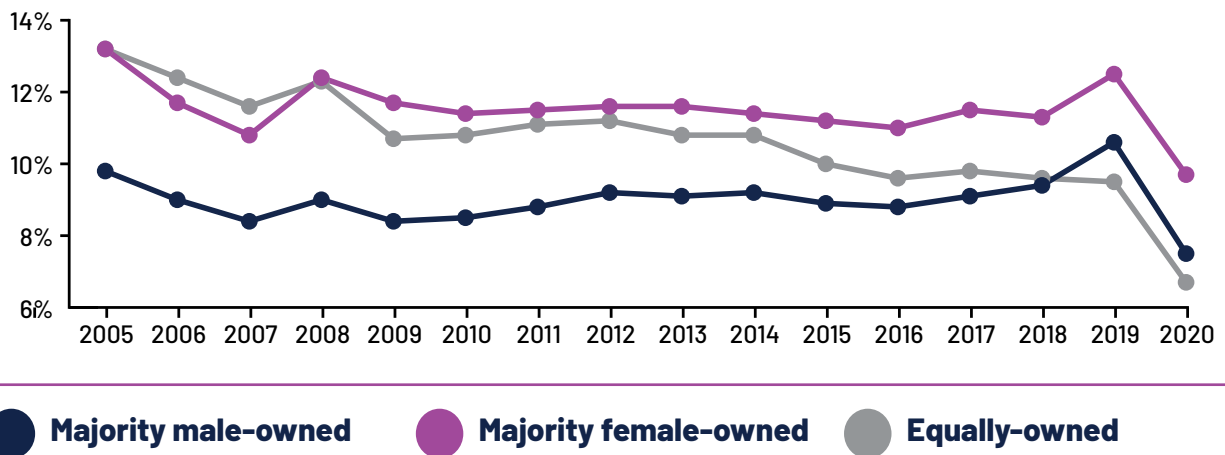
In 2024, women-owned businesses accounted for just 19.6% of Canada's businesses, despite accounting for approximately half of Canada's population.<sup>23</sup> Women's business ownership rates vary by intersectional identity, with women accounting for a greater proportion of Indigenous (24.7%), Black (29.6%), and official language minority (OLM)(36%) businesses<sup>24</sup> than Canadian businesses more generally (19.6%).<sup>25</sup>

While women remain underrepresented in Canada's business ecosystem, women entrepreneurship

and business ownership is growing. From 2014 to 2024, the percentage of Canada's businesses that are women-owned increased by approximately four percentage points to 19.6%.<sup>26</sup> Though in absolute terms, more businesses were started by men, from 2005 to 2020, the business birth rate was higher for women-owned businesses than for men-owned businesses (see Figure 3).<sup>27</sup> From 2014 to 2020, the average birth rate for women-owned businesses was 11.2%, while for men-owned businesses, it was 9.1%.

**Figure 3: Business Birth Rate by Gender Majority Ownership of Businesses with One or More Employees**

## Business birth rate by gender-majority ownership of businesses with one or more employees



**Source:** Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, Key Small Business Statistics 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0769-01 Private Sector Business Counts by Majority Ownership, First Quarter of 2024," February 26, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310076901>.  
<sup>24</sup> OLM businesses are businesses owned by Canadians who belong to an OLM community. OLM communities speak one of Canada's two official languages—English or French—but live in a geographic region where the other official language is predominately used.  
<sup>25</sup> Bassirou Gueye, "Black Business Owners in Canada," Statistics Canada, February 22, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2023001-eng.htm>.  
<sup>26</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0769-01 Private Sector Business Counts by Majority Ownership, First Quarter of 2024," February 26, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310076901>.  
<sup>27</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "SME Profile: Ownership Demographics Statistics," January 20, 2020, <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/research-reports/sme-profile-ownership-demographics-statistics/sme-profile-ownership-demographics-statistics>.





Intersectional identities also impact business ownership, birth, and survival rates. For example, when it comes to Canadian business ownership, Black women are one of the most underrepresented groups, representing just 1.7% of Canadian business owners despite making up 3.8% of Canada's population.<sup>28</sup> When compared to other business owners, Black business owners tend to be younger, are more likely to be new business owners, and are more likely to own younger, smaller businesses with fewer employees.<sup>29</sup> These disparities are another indicator of the challenges faced by Black entrepreneurs in Canada, including less access to resources, less opportunities for growth and expansion, and hindered ability to compete with larger, more established firms.<sup>30</sup>

While Black men are also underrepresented in Canada's entrepreneurship and business ownership ecosystems, data suggests that Black women face more barriers to entrepreneurship and business ownership than Black men. In 2005, Black women represented 1.3% of self-employed Canadian women and 1% of Canadian women business owners.<sup>31</sup> By 2018, these figures had increased to 2.2% and 1.5% respectively, indicating positive growth in access to entrepreneurship and business ownership for Black women in Canada.<sup>32</sup> However, representation of Black men meanwhile grew at a faster rate, indicating that while Black representation in business ownership is improving, Black women still face more barriers than men.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0843-01 Number of Enterprises in Canada, by Revenue Group and Visible Minority Status of Owner," September 10, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310084301>.

<sup>29</sup> Canadian Black Chamber of Commerce and BDC, "Building Black Businesses in Canada: Personas, Perceptions, & Experiences," February 2021, <https://www.blackchamber.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Building-Black-Businesses-in-Canada--Feb-27-2021.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Bassirou Gueye, "Black Business Owners in Canada," Statistics Canada, February 22, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2023001-eng.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

# WHAT TYPES OF BUSINESSES DO CANADIAN WOMEN OWN?

Women more often start and own businesses in sectors with high social impact, including government, health, education, and social services.<sup>34</sup> Women-owned businesses are also more common in the service-sector industries, such as retail trade, tourism and accommodation & food services.<sup>35</sup> Gender diversity, unfortunately, remains low in industrial sectors, such as construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction, and technology, which are historically men-dominated.

Women are more likely than men to create businesses centred on sustainability. Research shows they are more likely than men to practice social and environmental sustainability in their business; prioritize sustainability over economic gains; integrate economic, social, and environmental sustainability goals into their business objectives; make choices that enhance environmental sustainability and conservation; and establish a sustainability-oriented organizational culture.<sup>36</sup> One study that examined over 1,000 Canadian and American women-led SMEs focused on sustainability and advancing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), concluded that women entrepreneurs are "among the most active, resilient, and resourceful groups of entrepreneurs driving sustainable development in Canada and the U.S."<sup>37</sup>

Digital technology is a promising area of opportunity for women entrepreneurs given that digital technology businesses generally have lower barriers to entry than traditional businesses. Indeed, research suggests that Canadian women entrepreneurs are more likely than Canadian men entrepreneurs to operate exclusively online, at 42% and 34% respectively.<sup>38</sup>

Digital social innovation (DSI), which involves the use of digital technologies to create innovative products, services, process, or business models that benefit community development or generate social impact, is another area of opportunity.<sup>39</sup> It focuses on social innovation in addition to technological innovation, seeking to solve pressing societal challenges like those outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>40</sup> To date, many Canadian women have started or own businesses in the DSI space, including:

- › **TechSpark**, founded by Tamar Huggins in Toronto, Ontario, is the first technology and design school committed to empowering children of color, girls, women, and teachers through innovative tech programming.<sup>41</sup>
- › **SkyAcres**, co-founded by Zaffia Laplante in Surrey, British Columbia, offers an indoor farming software and marketplace for fruit and vegetable growers and commercial buyers. This platform allows users with underutilized residential and commercial space to grow and sell produce, promoting sustainable urban agriculture.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, "New GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report Underscores Breaking Stereotypes and Seizing Opportunities," 2023, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/reports/womens-entrepreneurship>.

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Tam, Shivani Sood, and Chris Johnston, "Analysis on Majority Women-Owned Businesses, First Quarter of 2024," Statistics Canada, March 8, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-621-m/11-621-m2024001-eng.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Wendy Cukier et al., "BMO Celebrating Women Grant Program 2021: Women Business Owners and Their Contributions to Sustainability - Executive Summary," BMO, November 2021, [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BMO\\_Celebrating\\_Women\\_Grant\\_Program\\_2021\\_Report\\_ExecutiveSummary.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/BMO_Celebrating_Women_Grant_Program_2021_Report_ExecutiveSummary.pdf), 4.

<sup>37</sup> BMO, "BMO Announces 2021 BMO Celebrating Women Grant Recipients," November 19, 2021, <https://about.bmo.com/bmo-announces-2021-bmo-celebrating-women-grant-recipients/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Israr Qureshi, Shan L. Pan, and Yingqin Zheng, "Digital Social Innovation: An Overview and Research Framework," *Information Systems Journal* 31, no. 5 (2021): 647-71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12362>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tech Spark, "We Are Tech Spark Canada | Spark the Brain. Change the World.," accessed November 13, 2024, <https://techspark.ai>.

<sup>42</sup> S. K. Uddin, "Innovating in Agritech: Zaffia Laplante's Vision for SkyAcres' Future," *Small Business Hub*, May 13, 2024, <https://smbhub.ca/innovating-in-agritech-zaffia-laplantes-vision-for-skyacres-future/>.



- › **ALT TEX**, founded by Myra Arshad, transforms food waste into biodegradable, carbon-neutral textiles. This innovation addresses environmental issues in the fashion industry, which is projected to create more than 25% of the world's carbon emissions by 2050.<sup>43</sup>
- › **RUNWITHIT Synthetics**, founded by Myrna Bittner in Sherwood Park, Alberta, uses digital twins to assess environmental risks for buildings, utilities, and entire cities. This technology helps in designing and optimizing complex systems for sustainability.<sup>44</sup>
- › **Careteam**, a Vancouver-based company founded by Alexandra Greenhill, that provides a digital platform to facilitate collaboration between patients, families, and health professionals.<sup>45</sup>
- › **MedReddie**, founded by Kara LeBlanc in Kitchener-Waterloo. MedReddie is revolutionizing the healthcare supply chain with its cutting-edge AI-powered platform, setting a new standard for medical solution procurement and healthcare outcomes.<sup>46</sup>
- › **Orpyx**, a Calgary-based company founded by Breanne Everett. Orpyx uses technology to assist people with diabetes in maintaining mobility through preventing and managing diabetic foot ulcers. They recently partnered with a subsidiary of Alphabet.<sup>47</sup>
- › **Qanik DX**, Calgary based company founded by Sonya Satveit. Qanik DX company has developed a hormone sensor allowing people to test their hormones at home without needing a doctor.<sup>48</sup>
- › **Nimble Science**, co-founded by Sabina Bruehlmann in Calgary, has developed an ingestible device capable of collecting samples from the small intestine. This innovation could revolutionize diagnostics and treatment in gastroenterology.<sup>49</sup>
- › **Tealbook**, a Toronto-based company founded by Stephany Lapierre, provides procurement teams with an AI-powered platform for delivering accuracy and analytics across the supplier base.<sup>50</sup>
- › **Virtual Gurus**, a Calgary-based company founded by Bobbie Racette. It's a talent-as-a-service company that provides companies with "virtual assistants."<sup>51</sup>
- › **Welbi**, an Ottawa-based company founded by Elizabeth Audette-Bourdeau. Welbi offers management software for senior living communities that allow them to engage residents in personalized enrichment programming.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>43</sup> ALT TEX, "Home," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://thealttex.com/>.

<sup>44</sup> RUNWITHIT Synthetics, "Synthetic Intelligence & Modelling for the Future," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://rwisynthetics.com>.

<sup>45</sup> Careteam Technologies, "Careteam - Patient Success Solution," 2024, <https://www.getcareteam.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> Steven Fyke, "MedReddie Ushers in a New Era of Healthcare Supply Chain Innovation - Medredie," November 17, 2023, <https://medredie.com/medredie-ushers-in-a-new-era-of-healthcare-supply-chain-innovation/>.

<sup>47</sup> Orpyx, "Orpyx | Extending Healthspan for People Living with Diabetes," 2024, <https://www.orpyx.com/>.

<sup>48</sup> Qanik DX, "Qanik DX," 2018, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.qanikdx.com>.

<sup>49</sup> Nimble Science, "Home | Nimble Science | Small Intestine Sampling Technology," Nimble Science, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.nimblesci.com>.

<sup>50</sup> TealBook, "Home," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.tealbook.com/>.

<sup>51</sup> Virtual Gurus, "Virtual Assistants & Remote Talent | Hire Administrative Support," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://thevirtualgurus.com/>.

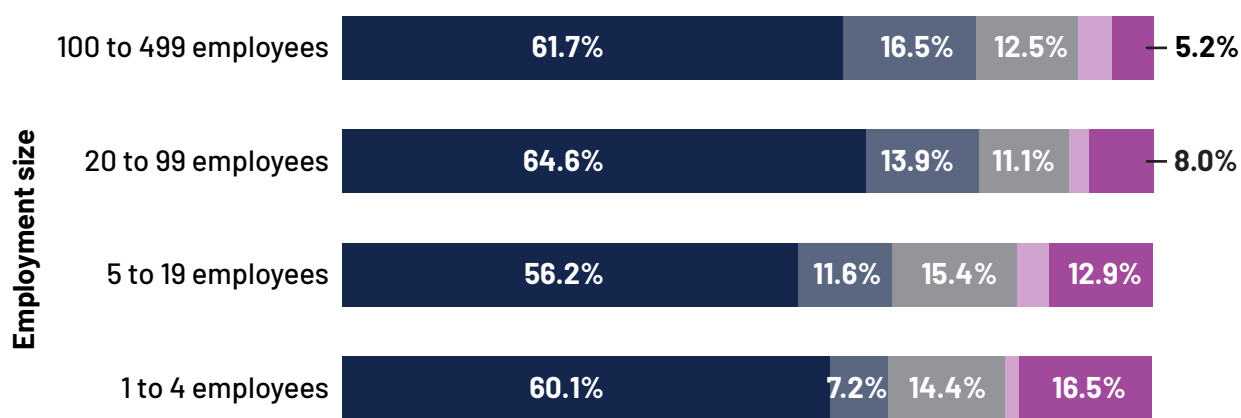
<sup>52</sup> Welbi, "Welbi | Where Life Enrichment Drives Well-Being and Revenue," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.welbi.co/>.

Though the business birth rate among women-owned businesses has been high, challenges remain. First, women-owned businesses tend to be smaller enterprises (see Figure 4). The gender disparity in business ownership becomes more pronounced as enterprise size increases. In the micro-enterprise

category (1 to 4 employees), women own 16.5% of businesses, while men own 60.1%. This gap widens significantly for medium-sized enterprises (100–499 employees), where women’s ownership drops to a 5.2%, in contrast to men’s 61.7%.<sup>53</sup>

**Figure 4: Ownership Characteristics of Small and Medium Enterprises**

**SME Ownership: A Gender Perspective**



**Source:** Statistics Canada, Table 33-10-0459-01, Ownership characteristics of small and medium enterprises, 2020.

Moreover, long-term survival rates for women-owned businesses tend to be lower than for men-owned businesses, threatening the ability of women entrepreneurs to catch up. Within the first two years, the survival rate between women- and men-owned businesses is similar. After five years,

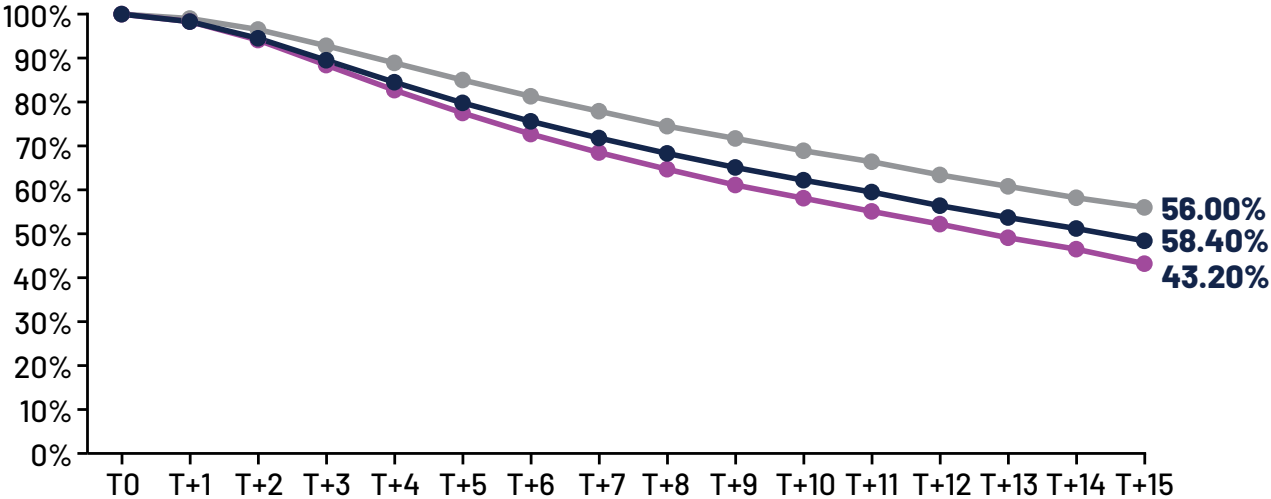
the survival rate for the majority of men-owned businesses is 2.3 percentage points higher. By the 10-year mark, this gap widens to 4.1 percentage points. After 15 years, just 43.2% of women-owned businesses remain, compared to 48.4% of men-owned businesses.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0459-01 Ownership Characteristics of Small and Medium Enterprises, 2020," November 13, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3310045901>.

<sup>54</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "Key Small Business Statistics 2023," July 23, 2024, <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2023>.

**Figure 5: Survival Rate by Gender Majority Ownership of Businesses with 1-99 Employee**

**Survival rate by gender majority ownership of businesses with 1-99 employees, Canada**



● **Majority female-owned**     
 ● **Majority male-owned**     
 ● **Equally-owned**

**Source:** Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, Key Small Business Statistics 2023.

➔
 As the subsequent section will show, women-owned businesses face several barriers to growth and survival that may account for this discrepancy in survival rates. First among them is access to sufficient capital and financing.



## SECTION II:

# BARRIERS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR CANADIAN WOMEN AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM

This section examines the barriers that women entrepreneurs face when trying to access financing to sustain or grow their business, both at the ecosystem level and at the individual level. Understanding these challenges is critical to creating solutions to address them. It also explores the actionable strategies and solutions that can be employed at the individual and ecosystem-wide level to address these barriers. When applied, these best practices can help create a more diverse and inclusive entrepreneurial landscape.



# ECOSYSTEM-WIDE AND ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES

Ecosystem-wide barriers pertain to Canada's entire entrepreneurship ecosystem. They are barriers that women entrepreneurs face irrespective of their personal characteristics, such as the type of business they own or their level of confidence in their business. Ecosystem-wide barriers can be challenging to solve because they pertain to the entire ecosystem as a whole and so there is not often one organization or entity who is responsible for solving them: addressing them requires a coordinated approach. Still, because ecosystem-wide barriers impact all women entrepreneurs, they are an important area of focus for increasing the number and success of women entrepreneurs in Canada.

## Barrier I: Access to Capital

In a 2020 Statistics Canada survey on obstacles to business growth for SMEs, majority women-owned businesses were more likely than other SMEs to report obtaining financing as a major barrier to growth.<sup>55</sup> Interviewees in this study also felt that the most significant barrier to success for women entrepreneurs is not a lack of knowledge but a shortage of capital to apply that knowledge effectively. Several interviewees recounted how the funding gap between men and women entrepreneurs is still very evident. For instance, one interviewee shared the story of a female founder who, after a year of fundraising and attending over 50 meetings with venture capitalists and investment firms, had no success obtaining funding. Meanwhile, the owner's man partner, whose business was less established, was able to secure \$1 million in only two months.

This sentiment is also reflected in other research. A survey of women and non-binary entrepreneurs in Canada in 2022 found that respondents were most likely to finance their businesses using personal or household savings and credit cards versus funding from banks, angel investors, and capital investors.<sup>56</sup> Among survey respondents, 69% had used personal or household savings and 52% had used credit cards to finance their business, while 28% of

respondents had accessed funding from banks, 2% had accessed funding from angel investors, and just 1% had accessed venture capital funds.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, women entrepreneurs receive just 4% of Canada's venture capital investment and remain among the least capitalized.<sup>58</sup>

When women do secure private sector capital, they tend to secure smaller deals. Men-owned businesses typically receive larger loans than women-owned businesses.<sup>59</sup> On average, loans approved for businesses owned by men are about 1.5 times bigger than those granted to women-owned businesses. This means that even when women secure loans for their businesses, the average amount of financing authorized is significantly lower compared to their men counterparts.

Studies point to a number of reasons why women entrepreneurs may face difficulty accessing private sector capital. With respect to institutional banking, one reason women may struggle to qualify for a loan is due to their business size, as women are more likely than men to have smaller businesses.<sup>60</sup> They may also struggle due to the difficulty of securing bank loans when pitching an innovative idea with little precedent on the market.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Statistics Canada, "Table 33-10-0447-01 Obstacles to Business Growth for Small and Medium Enterprises," March 2, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3310044701>.

<sup>56</sup> Alison Kirkland, Saijal Patel, and Dr. Moira Somers, "Bootstrap or Borrow? Improving Equity and Access to Financing for Women and Non-Binary Entrepreneurs in Canada" (Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada, November 2022), [https://weoc.ca/site-content/uploads/2022/11/WEOC\\_Bootstrap-or-Borrow\\_FINAL-EN.pdf](https://weoc.ca/site-content/uploads/2022/11/WEOC_Bootstrap-or-Borrow_FINAL-EN.pdf), 21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Innovation Science and Economic Development Canada, "Minister Ng Launches Call for Applications to Deliver the Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative," April 25, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-science-economic-development/news/2022/04/minister-ng-launches-call-for-applications-to-deliver-the-inclusive-women-venture-capital-initiative.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Marilyn Gladu, "Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Entrepreneurs," March 2021, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2023," June 27, 2023, <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2023/>, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 45.



Within the venture capital ecosystem, on the other hand, one of the primary reasons is that the private investment landscape is highly populated by men. Globally, just 15% of all venture capital “cheque-writers” are women,<sup>62</sup> while in Canada, just 30% of venture capital firms have a woman partner and on average, 12% of partners are women.<sup>63</sup> One interviewee explained that many of the women investors who do exist are new to investing, have less capital, and have a lower risk tolerance, leading them to invest smaller amounts. Several interviewees highlighted the lack of women in the investment and venture capital landscape as a contributing factor to women entrepreneurs avoiding the investment and venture capital space and highlighted the need for more opportunities for women to participate in the investment and capital space. In addition to this, gender imbalances in the VC ecosystem leads to misalignment between women-centric businesses and investors, and gender biases in investment decisions.

Given the barriers to accessing capital through banks and investors, many women entrepreneurs turn to alternative funding sources, such as government grants, to get the funding they need. However, during interviews, many women entrepreneurs expressed that they had encountered restrictive program eligibility criteria that had prevented them from applying for or securing funding. For example, women entrepreneurs, who tend to own newer and smaller businesses compared to men, had limited financial resources and less access to financial support to weather the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>64</sup> The Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA) offered small businesses and not-for-profits an interest-free loan of up to \$60,000.<sup>65</sup> However, many women

entrepreneurs did not qualify for these loans due to the small size of their businesses and their limited capacity or willingness to take on additional debt, as reported by the Women’s Enterprise Centre.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the administrative burden of applying for assistance discouraged some women entrepreneurs from seeking this support.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, interviewees noted that some programs exclude earlier-stage founders, both intentionally and unintentionally, by requiring applicants to be in business for a certain number of years or to be generating a specific amount of revenue. Interviewees also mentioned other eligibility requirements, such as age restrictions, as restricting access to programming. The process of securing grant funding was described as long and gruelling by one women entrepreneur. Competition for smaller grants is incredibly high, making it difficult to justify the time spent on applications, especially when the chances of success are slim.

Entrepreneurs from equity-deserving communities, such as Black women entrepreneurs, face additional barriers to accessing funding and other supports.<sup>68 69</sup> Many Black women entrepreneurs have businesses in the service industry and are self-financed, and are more likely to be underfinanced,<sup>70</sup> which makes them among the most susceptible to economic crises like that spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>71</sup> A Black woman entrepreneur expressed experiencing a lack of diversity in the grant space, stating that when applying for grants, the person evaluating your application is always a white man. She added that women entrepreneurs, and particularly women of colour, face higher standards for receiving government funding.

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<sup>62</sup> Henadi Al-Saleh, “Empowering Female Founders: How We Can Narrow the Gender Gap in Venture Capital,” World Economic Forum, December 28, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/12/how-we-can-close-the-venture-capital-gender-gap/>.

<sup>63</sup> #movethedial, PwC Canada, and MaRS, “Where’s the Dial Now? Benchmarking Report 2017,” 2017, [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/55c9d2\\_efb58fc4258b40978b5d2bc3a9d2a577.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/55c9d2_efb58fc4258b40978b5d2bc3a9d2a577.pdf), 3.

<sup>64</sup> Marilyn Gladu, “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Entrepreneurs,” March 2021, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf), 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub et al., “Rise Up: A Study of 700 Black Women Entrepreneurs,” April 15, 2021, <https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BBPA-Rise-Up.pdf>, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Marilyn Gladu, “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women,” March 2021, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/parl/x71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf), 42.

<sup>70</sup> Mohamed Elmi et al., “The State of Women’s Entrepreneurship: A Focus on Black Women Entrepreneurs” (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, Black Business and Professional Association, February 2021), [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The\\_State\\_of\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_Black\\_Entrepreneurs.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The_State_of_Womens_Entrepreneurship_Black_Entrepreneurs.pdf), 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 9.





## Misalignment Between Investors and Women-Serving Businesses

Interviewees in this study shared that because the vast majority of investors are men, women entrepreneurs whose businesses are focused on women as consumers can face challenges when trying to secure funding. For example, one woman entrepreneur reported that businesses that address women's needs frequently have to justify the existence of the problems they are addressing, as unconscious biases lead to the dismissal of women's issues. A Black woman entrepreneur explained that in her experience, investors tend to invest in what they are familiar with, which often excludes gendered or culturally nuanced solutions that they may not fully understand. Thus, women entrepreneurs whose product is geared towards women may need to educate investors on their product's relevance, adding an extra layer of difficulty during pitching. For example, when seeking investors for a women's health app, a woman entrepreneur frequently encountered skepticism and discomfort from men investors who questioned the necessity of such products.

Several interviewees shared that they are often advised by investors to transition into a charity or non-profit, ignoring their strategic choice to adopt a corporate structure. For example, one woman entrepreneur shared that when they would ask others about creating a viable business model for their social enterprise, their questions were often dismissed as they were told to "just make it a non-profit," reflecting an expectation that social impact work should be done for free, as pointed out by one woman founder of a social enterprise. She explained that while their work is socially beneficial, the social enterprise model is essential for creating a sustainable enterprise, funding future growth, and attracting investors. She also described how a social enterprise must either generate exponential profits or operate as a non-profit to be taken seriously in Canada's entrepreneurial landscape. Unfortunately, social enterprises are frequently dismissed or undervalued in the Canadian business ecosystem, where there is limited understanding of and investment in these types of ventures.

## Gender Biases in Investment Decisions

Another reason why Canadian women entrepreneurs struggle to access private sector capital, including both institutional and venture capital, is gender bias. Biases in the funding ecosystem make it more difficult for women entrepreneurs to access the capital they need to grow their businesses. Gendered expectations impact how investors perceive women entrepreneurs and are likely to play a critical role in investors' evaluative processes when making investment decisions.<sup>72</sup> During interviews, women entrepreneurs reported experiencing gender bias in various ways during business interactions. Women entrepreneurs reported being underestimated by men, condescended and treated as if they lack knowledge in the entrepreneurship space. A CEO also highlighted that women entrepreneurs are often penalized for openly acknowledging gaps in their knowledge, with investors preferring overconfidence, which is typically exhibited by men. Another interviewee, a female founder, described an example of misogynistic comments she has received:

*"I was presenting to a very large angel network, and I was on a Zoom call with about eight men. After I did my presentation, one of the gentlemen on the line gave me some feedback around the fact that I wasn't enticing him enough by looking into the camera, and that I essentially needed to view it as an opportunity to move to the second date with him."*

She added that gender stereotypes, such as that women are less ambitious than men, negatively impact their chances of securing funding from investors. Others reported greater skepticism towards women-led ventures in the form of more rigorous questioning or preventative questioning, such as how they will avoid losing clients, while their men counterparts are asked proactive questions about how they plan to grow their businesses. Women entrepreneurs are also encouraged to suppress traits considered "feminine" when pitching to investors, such as being told "not to pitch like a girl."<sup>73</sup> This reemphasizes the idea that business success requires adopting stereotypically masculine behaviors.

<sup>72</sup> Vartuhi Tonoyan and Robert Strohmeier, "Gender Role (in-)Congruity and Resource-Provider Gender Biases: A Conceptual Model," *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 13, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 225-42, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-12-2020-0201>, 231.

<sup>73</sup> Golshan Javadian et al., "Does It Pay to Act Feminine? A Cross-Cultural Study of Gender Stereotype Endorsement and Cognitive Legitimacy in the Evaluation of New Ventures," *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 13, no. 4 (June 24, 2021): 330-52, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-07-2020-0092>.





## **Strategies: Provide Access to Capital, Financial Education, and Diverse Decision Makers While Reforming Funding Criteria.**

While, as this study has discussed, many women entrepreneurs report being “over-mentored and under-financed,” there are several directions to approach the problem of access to capital from, and one of these is education. It is critical to improve women entrepreneurs’ opportunities for education about small business financing, how to access equity funding, how to pitch, and best practices for structuring contracts and deals.<sup>74</sup> A strong example of this kind of work is the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) Indigenous Women’s Entrepreneurship Initiative. Supported by the Government of Canada, this program improves Indigenous women entrepreneurs’ ability to access funding, including via Aboriginal Financial Institutions.<sup>75</sup>

Education is also needed to improve funders’ ability to hear pitches from women entrepreneurs with less bias. The Canadian initiative Leading Lenders offers a free online toolkit and other content for lending institutions interested in supporting women-owned businesses. For example, the toolkit outlines common reasons women are disqualified from loan applications, as well as guidance on overcoming biases and stereotypes in lending decision-making.<sup>76</sup> Organizations that measure the economic contribution of women to the Canadian economy and articulate the business case for diversity in entrepreneurship to incubators, venture capital organizations, and banks can also help move the needle on access to investment.<sup>77</sup>

Interviewees in this study also suggested that civil society and government played a crucial role in addressing the underfunding of women entrepreneurs. Interventions can provide education to entrepreneurs and funders, expand the mandate of investment and banking sectors, and broaden alternative financing options such as micro-financing and zero-interest loans. Suggested mechanisms include tax incentives for investing in women-led businesses, creating investment collectives for non-accredited investors, and expanding the presence of angel investors in women-focused entrepreneurial spaces. Aligned existing programs include the Canadian Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative, a Government of Canada grant that has supported five national projects to increase access to venture capital funding for Canadian women entrepreneurs.<sup>78</sup> The public sector also plays a critical role in interrogating its own grant criteria to make sure it doesn’t inadvertently screen out businesses owned by women and women of colour.

<sup>74</sup> Barbara Orser, Catherine Elliott, and Wendy Cukier, “Strengthening Ecosystem Supports for Women Entrepreneurs: Ontario Inclusive Innovation (I2) Action Strategy,” 2019, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11623.50080>, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, “The State of Women’s Entrepreneurship in Canada 2023,” June 27, 2023, <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2023/>, 85.

<sup>76</sup> “Leading Lenders: Supporting Women Entrepreneurs Towards Success,” Restigouche CBDC Inc., accessed November 6, 2024, <https://leadinglenders.ca/en/>.

<sup>77</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub et al., “Rise Up: A Study of 700 Black Women Entrepreneurs,” April 15, 2021, <https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BBPA-Rise-Up.pdf>, 31.

<sup>78</sup> “WES Inclusive Venture Capital Initiative,” Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada, May 3, 2023, <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/women-entrepreneurship-strategy/en/wes-inclusive-women-venture-capital-initiative>.





## Barrier II: Misaligned Programs and Supports

While access to capital and financial education go hand in hand in supporting entrepreneurship for women, some of ICTC's interviewees suggested that education has gone too far. They offered examples where education was tied to minimal financial support, where they had to sit through redundant or basic training in order to access a small amount of capital. Well-intentioned mandatory programming runs the risk of patronizing clients or wasting their time, as opposed to a-la-carte program design where entrepreneurs can access the support they really need based on the stage they are at in their education and entrepreneurial journey.

In addition, interviewees commented that programs supporting entrepreneurs may adopt a "one size fits all" approach to programming, inadequately providing strategies for attendees like Black women entrepreneurs who need to navigate challenges

related to intersectionality when it comes to topics like pitching effectively and accessing funding. A Black woman founder added that many existing programs and resources lack cultural specificity and sensitivity, making them less effective for those who face unique challenges due to their intersecting identities. The founder of a women's entrepreneurship support organization explained that the existing business systems and structures were not designed with women or people of colour in mind, leading to inaccessibility. For example, time constraints can significantly impact women entrepreneurs' ability to participate in support programs, making it difficult to take full advantage of these opportunities. Support programs are more accessible to those without dependents or financial burdens, such as individuals living with parents or those with fewer immediate responsibilities.

### Strategy: Provide Targeted Programming

Program providers must consider the full range of their audience, including the experience of intersectionality in entrepreneurship, and invite organizations with expertise to contribute to program planning and design. Delivery changes, such as offering evening and weekend sessions, or building in flexibility for virtual participation might be especially beneficial for early-stage businesses or entrepreneurs still working other jobs or taking care of dependents.

It is also essential for program providers to actively seek feedback from participants and engage with entrepreneurs to understand the specific support they need. Instead of making assumptions, program providers should ask women entrepreneurs directly about the topics and resources that would be most beneficial to them. By doing so, support organizations can ensure their services are relevant and practical. This is especially important when designing programs for women and underrepresented groups where the need for intersectionality is pressing.

To truly understand the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs, it's crucial to create psychologically safe spaces where they can build together and then integrate these insights into the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. One interviewee, a Black woman entrepreneur, recommended designing programs for Black women entrepreneurs with input from Black women entrepreneurs who have successfully navigated the challenges of building a company to gain valuable insights into both the tangible and intangible aspects of their entrepreneurial journey.



## Barrier III: Networking Gap

Like programming for entrepreneurs, networking opportunities may be inadvertently designed in a way that limits access for women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of colour. In this study, several interviewees felt there was a lack of networking opportunities targeted at women entrepreneurs, and that opportunities that do not target women are often designed in a way that does not enable women to attend. For instance, one interviewee commented that women who have children at home find it difficult to engage in certain networking events, especially those that occur late at night. Another interviewee added that gendered expectations can place additional pressure on women to prioritize home responsibilities, leaving them with limited opportunities to attend networking events. As one interviewee, a woman CEO, noted, a lack of networking opportunities for women in Canada's entrepreneurship ecosystem means that the knowledge of seasoned women entrepreneurs is not always passed down, emphasizing the need for opportunities to transfer this knowledge.

Multiple interviewees identified a gender gap in the willingness of investors to network with entrepreneurs. A women entrepreneur described how certain networking events have a "boys club" feeling to them, and that many funding decisions are made based on personal relationships rather than business merit. One CEO noted that key

networking events, such as private dinners where crucial connections and decisions are made, are often inaccessible to women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, a director at a women's business association stated that women who are just starting their entrepreneurial journey tend to have smaller professional networks compared to men, or their networks are not business-related. This disparity limits their access to mentorship and business opportunities. The lack of diversity in certain industries strengthens the network gap, leaving women entrepreneurs with fewer trusted connections<sup>79</sup> and resulting in reduced access to networks.

Black women entrepreneurs experience intersecting challenges when it comes to accessing networking events. Research shows that many Black women entrepreneurs have less access to crucial social networks for business deals and investment.<sup>80</sup> Black women entrepreneurs' social networks might limit their access to career-building information.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, Black immigrant women, who make up 53.5% of Black women entrepreneurs in Canada, face the challenge of building a network in a new country where they may not have existing connections.<sup>82</sup> This limitation results in over-reliance on their network and restricts them from gaining connections within the business community, limiting their business growth.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Barbara Orser, Catherine Elliott, and Wendy Cukier, *Strengthening Ecosystem Supports for Women Entrepreneurs: Ontario Inclusive Innovation (I2) Action Strategy*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11623.50080>, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2023," June 27, 2023, <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2023/>, 111.

<sup>81</sup> Adia M. Harvey, "Becoming Entrepreneurs: Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender at the Black Beauty Salon," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 789–808, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205280104>.

<sup>82</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2024," July 31, 2024, <https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WEKH-The-State-of-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-Canada-2024.pdf>, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Sancheeta Pugalia and Dilek Cetindamar, "Insights on the Glass Ceiling for Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs in the Technology Sector," *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 44–68, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-10-2020-0169>, 55.





## Strategy: Networking and Mentorship Support

Program providers must consider the full range of their audience, including the experience of Networking and mentorship are essential for women entrepreneurs. Mentors help women entrepreneurs gain knowledge of their business and solve problems, provide expertise on business issues and psychological support, and help with outreach to stakeholders.<sup>84</sup> The psychological support given through mentoring and role-modeling has been shown to be critical for members of equity-deserving groups.<sup>85</sup> For example, opportunities to highlight success stories and elevate role models who are Black women entrepreneurs are essential.<sup>86</sup>

As expressed by one interviewee, business success depends on having a great product and knowing the right people who can give you access to opportunities. Another highlighted the benefit of relationships with other women entrepreneurs, describing the social networks of women entrepreneurs as a community where resources and support are shared. She explained how this mutual exchange is invaluable during challenging times when feedback and advice from a trusted network can provide solutions to obstacles. One woman founder added that the feedback and support received is especially important for women entrepreneurs without a business background since they might not be able to receive business-oriented support otherwise. She underlined that building a network is one of the primary benefits of programming provided by organizations supporting early-stage entrepreneurs. This notion was supported by another interviewee who stated that expanding networking and mentorship programs will help women entrepreneurs build the relationships necessary for sustained success.

Interviewees highlighted the need for more networking events and opportunities specifically tailored to women entrepreneurs. Several interviewees commented that support from other women entrepreneurs is especially impactful and effective. This is supported by research which found that women mentored by other women experience many benefits such as increased self-efficacy, a greater sense of belonging, increased access to valuable resources, and increased information sharing and collaboration.<sup>87</sup> A woman entrepreneur shared that networking events are more effective when they are smaller and more intimate, since at larger events, the chances of forming real connections diminish. She added that the most effective networking is one-on-one outreach through platforms like LinkedIn, where meaningful relationships can be developed more easily. Additionally, a support organization co-founder suggested establishing a stronger virtual network for women entrepreneurs and investors across Canada to help bridge geographic gaps and provide continuous support for women entrepreneurs after a networking event has finished.

Interviewees also gave advice and techniques for effective networking. They recommended being strategic in the approach to networking and focusing on finding someone who truly fits the need since not all connections will be equally relevant to your business. A support organization founder advised women entrepreneurs to reject the prevailing narrative around entrepreneurship that emphasizes self-reliance over seeking help, which can lead to perfectionist tendencies that make it more difficult to ask for assistance. They also highlighted the need to be proactive in making connections and leveraging your existing network, especially if you have built relevant relationships in a previous career.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>85</sup> Kaisa Snellman and Isabelle Solal, "Does Investor Gender Matter for the Success of Female Entrepreneurs? Gender Homophily and the Stigma of Incompetence in Entrepreneurial Finance," *Organization Science* 34, no. 2 (March 2023): 680-99, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2022.1594>, 683-4.

<sup>86</sup> Mohamed Elmi et al., "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship: A Focus on Black Women Entrepreneurs" (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, Black Business and Professional Association, February 2021), [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The\\_State\\_of\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_Black\\_Entrepreneurs.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The_State_of_Womens_Entrepreneurship_Black_Entrepreneurs.pdf), 2.

<sup>87</sup> Kaisa Snellman and Isabelle Solal, "Does Investor Gender Matter for the Success of Female Entrepreneurs? Gender Homophily and the Stigma of Incompetence in Entrepreneurial Finance," *Organization Science* 34, no. 2 (March 2023): 680-99, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2022.1594>, 680.



## Barrier IV: Tokenism

Tokenism is the symbolic, deliberate and cynical inclusion of a small number of individuals from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of equality.<sup>88</sup> It can significantly harm women entrepreneurs by reducing their contributions to their businesses and entrepreneurship to diversity, rather than valuing their expertise in and of itself. Tokenistic practices not only diminish the impact of diversity policies but can also reinforce harmful stereotypes, creating the perception that women or underrepresented groups are funded, awarded a grant, or appointed to a board solely to check a box, rather than because they are the best candidates. This approach ultimately undermines genuine efforts to promote inclusivity and equality in the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

In this study, a number of interviewees shared stories of tokenism they had witnessed in Canada's

entrepreneurial ecosystem. The founder of an organization supporting women in tech shared a story about a woman with a technical Master's degree and over a decade of experience in tech who was often invited to speak at conferences, but only in the context of her being a woman in tech as opposed to being asked to share her expertise in the field. Similarly, a member of a women's entrepreneurship support organization told the story of an Indigenous woman who received numerous invitations to join boards, only to find that she was there to "check a box", with no real voice, input, or influence. A Black woman founder meanwhile discussed how Black entrepreneurs tend to get a lot of media features and attention, which often does not translate into support for the business, stating that people prioritize the narrative around a Black-owned business over the reality of what is taking place in that business.

### Strategy: Inclusive Leadership and Diversified Decision-Making

Tokenism is often perpetuated unintentionally. One of the most effective ways to mitigate tokenism is to share authority, leadership, and decision-making power: first, to ensure that decision-makers (funders, conference organizers, etc.) have diverse lived experiences, and second, to ensure that any appointments come with meaningful opportunity for input and direction.<sup>89</sup> For example, all appointed members on a Board should have meaningful opportunity to contribute and direct an organization: a role without meaningful power or authority may be a clear indicator of tokenism.



<sup>88</sup> Ryan Payne, Jennifer Kruwinnus, and D. Grant-Smith, "Inclusive Leadership Framework to Promote a Climate for Participation: A Framework to Address Inclusiveness, Tokenism, Equity, and the Advancement of Female Entrepreneurs," October 2022, 86-109, [https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5216-5\\_ch005](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5216-5_ch005), 89.

<sup>89</sup> Ryan Payne and Michelle Keeffe, "Advancing Meaningful Inclusion in the Workplace: A Model for Avoiding Tokenism and Marginalization," in *Role of Human Resources for Inclusive Leadership, Workplace Diversity, and Equity in Organizations*, 2023, 1-19, [https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6602-5\\_ch001](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6602-5_ch001).



# INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES

This section discusses barriers to women’s entrepreneurship that can be identified and addressed at the individual level. Systemic inequity-causing barriers are typically rooted in systemic causes: for example, while this section will discuss individual self-confidence, society-wide gendered norms contribute to individual perceptions. Nevertheless, it is possible to tackle this challenge through one-one interventions as well as through ecosystem-wide approaches.

## Barrier I: Self-Confidence and Self-Perceptions

Research has found that compared to men, women perceive their start-up skills to be less developed and tend to have greater fear of failure.<sup>90</sup> In this study, many interviewees noted that is common for women entrepreneurs to lack self-confidence and struggle with feelings of imposter syndrome. The founder of a women’s business investment organization also highlighted that women entrepreneurs need to be aware of how they perpetuate biases against other women entrepreneurs. For example, she indicated that some women entrepreneurs can be unsympathetic towards younger women entrepreneurs with a goal of “toughening them up” in preparation for navigating the entrepreneurship space. However, she suggested that this approach is counterintuitive, since empathy and compassion are needed when women already experience challenges from everywhere else in the ecosystem.

Women entrepreneurs’ self-confidence and self-perceptions can impact their business outcomes in a number of ways. For example, two interviewees noted that women’s self-confidence and self-perception can impact their ability to successfully pitch and raise funds for their business. One interviewee reported seeing women entrepreneurs make self-deprecating comments when pitching, while the other noted that women entrepreneurs tend to undervalue themselves and their products. Studies have also found that women entrepreneurs were less likely than men to apply for or receive federal emergency supports for their businesses

during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many women business owners stating they struggled with or hesitated to seek federal or provincial emergency funding programs.<sup>91</sup>

The issue of self-confidence is more pronounced for women entrepreneurs in industries dominated by men. Women’s self-perception of their competence in technical occupations is often identified as a barrier to women’s participation in STEM fields.<sup>92</sup> Skepticism from investors in industries dominated by men causes women entrepreneurs to set a higher standard for themselves to “prove that they have what it takes to succeed at a men-typical task.”<sup>93</sup>

Systemic discrimination and anti-Black racism within the business ecosystem also exacerbate these challenges.<sup>94</sup> Black women entrepreneurs frequently encounter prejudice and stereotyping from investors and other key players. They face the double jeopardy of gender and racial discrimination which combine to contribute to the unique challenges they experience.<sup>95</sup> The resulting lack of representation can create imposter syndrome, where Black women struggle to see themselves as successful entrepreneurs due to the scarcity of role models, as expressed by the CEO of a Black entrepreneurship organization:

*“Imposter syndrome is a big one because there are not that many of us, you can’t see us. If you can see it, you can be it. There aren’t that many examples just yet. So, there’s a feeling of imposter syndrome that keeps you back.”*

<sup>90</sup> Wendy Cukier and Zohreh Hassannezhad Chavoushi, “Facilitating Women Entrepreneurship in Canada: The Case of WEKH,” *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 35, no. 3 (January 1, 2020): 303–18, <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-11-2019-0204>, 308.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Bipasha Baruah and Crystal Gaudet, “Creating and Optimizing Employment Opportunities for Women in the Clean Energy Sector in Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 56 (March 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2019-0010>, 246.

<sup>93</sup> Vartuhi Tonoyan and Robert Strohmeier, “Gender Role (in-)Congruity and Resource-Provider Gender Biases: A Conceptual Model,” *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 13, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 225–42, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-12-2020-0201>, 235.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Gené Teare, “Highlighting Notable Funding to Black Founders in 2020,” *Crunchbase News*, February 12, 2021, <https://news.crunchbase.com/startups/highlighting-notable-funding-to-black-founders-in-2020/>.







### Strategy: Combat Gender Roles

To combat gender roles and encourage more women to pursue entrepreneurship, societal change must begin with addressing ingrained stereotypes and expectations. For existing entrepreneurs, mentorship and networking programs like those discussed earlier in this paper can help build skills in daunting tasks like setting up a business plan, talking about money, and sample pitching. In addition, interview participants stated that change needs to occur at the societal level to encourage women to pursue entrepreneurship in the first place, although they admitted that doing so would not be an easy or short-term task.

To change perceptions on a broad scale, governments and organizations can conduct media campaigns and outreach activities which promote and normalize women's entrepreneurship.<sup>96</sup> There is also value to facilitating in-person workshops and activities with women entrepreneur role models to showcase and promote women's entrepreneurship.<sup>97</sup> Interviewees recommended education reforms that emphasize gender equality from a young age, promoting the idea that both boys and girls can excel in leadership, technology, and business fields. As suggested by one woman entrepreneur:

*"There could be more programs, maybe starting from the elementary school level, because nowadays we could also teach little girls that there are ways that they can expect more from themselves. In my era I wasn't told that. I was always told, 'You're a girl, and so you can't do this, you can't do that'. But I wish that, just from the elementary school level, girls were told, 'You know, you can do that.'"*

<sup>96</sup> Rathi Mani-Kandt, "To Empower Female Entrepreneurs, We Must Challenge Gender Norms," World Economic Forum, November 18, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/11/empower-female-entrepreneurs-challenge-gender-norms/>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



## Barrier II: Domestic and Caregiving Responsibilities

Women entrepreneurs are also affected by biases around domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Gendered norms around the roles of men and women are hard to dispel today, and can mean that working women are still expected to perform domestic and caregiving tasks in addition to the long hours required to start a business.<sup>98</sup> Interviewees discussed how women are more likely to be the primary caregiver due to these gender norms, and how these obligations hinder their capacity to build a work-life balance and pursue networking opportunities, since it makes women set aside career tasks to handle caregiving duties. They commented that the burden of these responsibilities is particularly felt when planning for significant life events such as retirement or maternity alongside their business ventures. This places a disproportionate mental load on women, which causes negative mental health impacts due to the stress of filling multiple roles and getting all their work done.<sup>99</sup> This burden is even more pronounced for Black women, since they are more likely to be single heads of households than white women and spend a significant amount of time on

domestic labour, with “75% of Black women spending a combined total of over 21 hours per week on housework.”<sup>100</sup>

Women entrepreneurs who are mothers often face challenges rooted in a lack of understanding and outdated perceptions of their roles in the workforce from decision-makers in the ecosystem. One women entrepreneur noted that these perceptions are often influenced by generational views on gender roles, where men’s attitudes toward domestic responsibilities are shaped by what they observed growing up. Interviewees recalled dealing with negative stereotypes that paint them as less dedicated to their businesses because they have children and described a general lack of empathy and understanding from men regarding the mental health impacts of pregnancy and the need to take leave. Moreover, research has suggested that women in the “sandwich generation,” who have the responsibility of caring for both children and older dependent family members, are at an increased risk of mental health challenges and burnout, further complicating their entrepreneurial journey.<sup>101</sup>



### Strategy: Improve Social Safety Nets and Provide Childcare

The impact of domestic and caregiving responsibilities on women’s entrepreneurship highlights the need for adequate social security to deal with illness, maternity, old age, job losses, and other risks to people’s well-being.<sup>102</sup> Support for pregnancy and maternity is crucial for encouraging more women, including Black women, to pursue entrepreneurship.<sup>103</sup> The lack of maternity leave and benefits for entrepreneurs creates significant barriers for women who wish to start and run their businesses; thus, government support in the form of maternity leave policies for entrepreneurs and subsidized daycare would be transformative. Quebec’s universal daycare system has been highlighted as a potential model for the rest of Canada.<sup>104</sup> Universal daycare programs are “absolutely essential” to ensure women entrepreneurs have the necessary support to balance their business and family responsibilities.<sup>105</sup> Finally, strategies already discussed—such as scheduling networking events during accessible times, and combatting gender roles at young ages, can help address this barrier.

<sup>98</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, “The State of Women’s Entrepreneurship in Canada 2024,” July 31, 2024, [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WEKH\\_The-State-of-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-Canada-2024.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WEKH_The-State-of-Womens-Entrepreneurship-in-Canada-2024.pdf), 174.

<sup>99</sup> Mohamed Elmi et al., “The State of Women’s Entrepreneurship: A Focus on Black Women Entrepreneurs” (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, Black Business and Professional Association, February 2021), [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The\\_State\\_of\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_Black\\_Entrepreneurs.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The_State_of_Womens_Entrepreneurship_Black_Entrepreneurs.pdf), 14.

<sup>100</sup> Jocelyn Frye, “On the Frontlines at Work and at Home: The Disproportionate Economic Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Women of Color” (Center for American Progress, April 23, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/frontlines-work-home/>.

<sup>101</sup> Irene Kamberidou, “Distinguished’ Women Entrepreneurs in the Digital Economy and the Multitasking Whirlpool,” *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 9, no. 1 (December 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-020-0114-y>, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Bipasha Baruah and Crystal Gaudet, “Creating and Optimizing Employment Opportunities for Women in the Clean Energy Sector in Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 56 (March 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2019-0010>, 248.

<sup>103</sup> Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub et al., “Rise Up: A Study of 700 Black Women Entrepreneurs,” April 15, 2021, <https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BBPA-Rise-Up.pdf>, 31.

<sup>104</sup> Marilyn Gladu, “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women,” March 2021, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2021/parl/xc71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2021/parl/xc71-1/XC71-1-1-432-6-eng.pdf), 24.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



## Transferable and Entrepreneurial Skills Training: A Challenge and a Solution

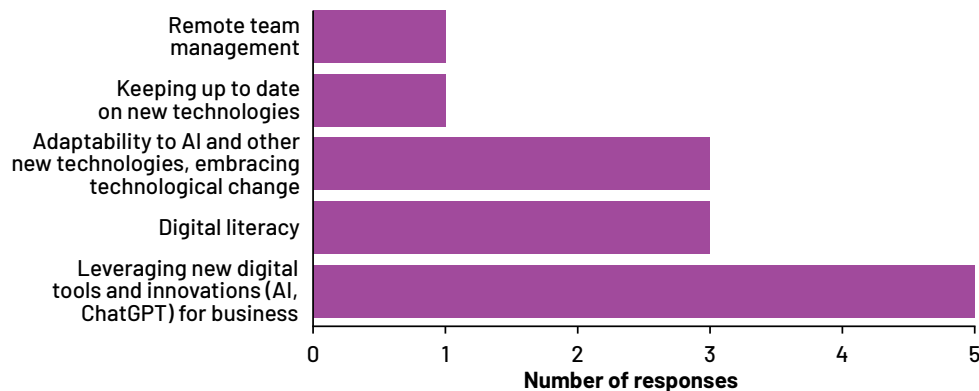
In this study, interviewees (women entrepreneurs and subject matter experts, such as women-owned accelerators) were asked what kind of skill training could best support women entrepreneurs to create successful businesses and thrive in the digital economy. In what follows, responses are broken up thematically to identify key priorities in skills training for women entrepreneurs.

### Technology Skills

Digital skills are increasingly vital for women entrepreneurs, enabling them to enhance efficiency, expand online visibility, engage customers effectively, and ensure secure business operations.<sup>106</sup> In today's digital age, the ability to adopt and use technologies is no longer optional—it is essential for growth, competitiveness, and business survival.<sup>107</sup> ICT tools facilitate improved access to information, foster employee collaboration, enhance product quality, and streamline business processes, making them key enablers of performance, especially for small firms.<sup>108</sup> Interview participants strongly emphasized how with the growing availability of advanced collaboration and productivity tools, women entrepreneurs need to embrace digital solutions to stay competitive and capitalize on new opportunities.

However, many women face knowledge gaps regarding technologies compared to men, since men are often exposed to technology earlier, through experiences like video games, which gives them a head start in understanding digital tools.<sup>109</sup> In contrast, many women entrepreneurs report discomfort and uncertainty when it comes to adopting new technologies, due to their lack of familiarity and their misconceptions about the skills required to use ICTs.<sup>110</sup> Addressing these gaps through targeted training and support will empower more women entrepreneurs to fully leverage digital technologies, unlocking greater potential for innovation and business success.

**Figure 6: Technology-Related Skills Development Needs of Women Entrepreneurs**



**Source:** Key Informant Interviews, ICTC.

<sup>106</sup> Anna Radulovski, "What Computer Skills Can Help Women Entrepreneurs Succeed in the Digital Age?," Women Tech Network, March 14, 2024, <https://www.womentech.net/en-us/how-to/what-computer-skills-can-help-women-entrepreneurs-succeed-in-digital-age>.

<sup>107</sup> Barbara Orser, Allan Riding, and Yanhong Li, "Technology Adoption and Gender-Inclusive Entrepreneurship Education and Training," *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 11, no. 3 (January 1, 2019): 273–98, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-02-2019-0026>, 274.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 281–2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



## Sales and Marketing

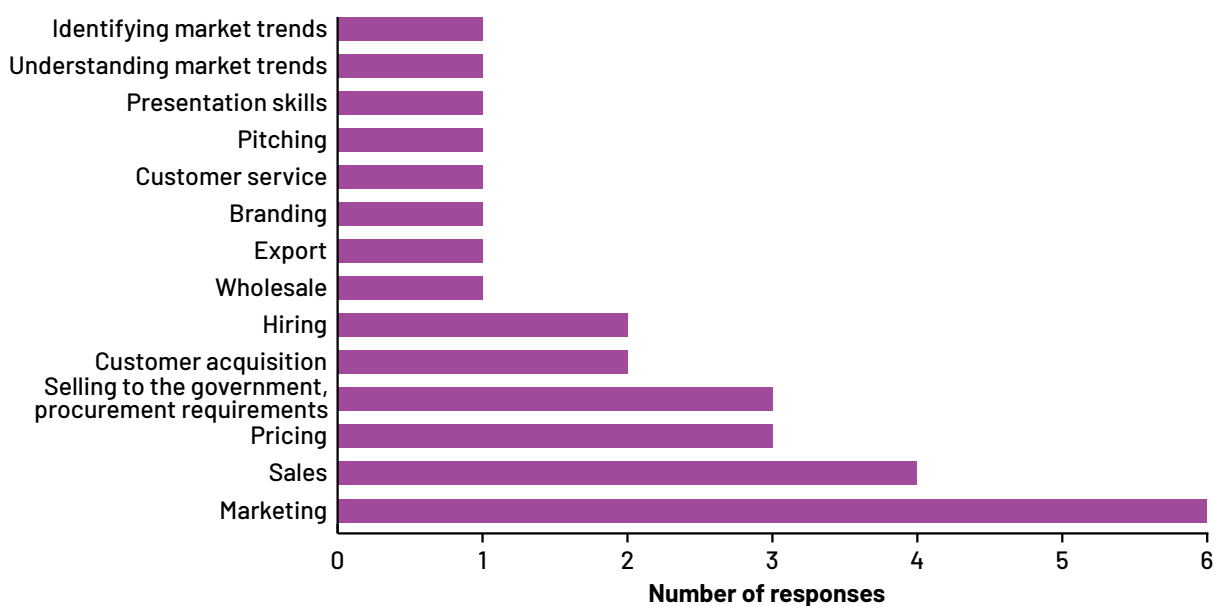
When asking women entrepreneurs what sort of training and skills development is needed, the most common answer for sales- and marketing-related skills (and the most common answer overall), was marketing skills. They were followed by sales skills, and then the ability to price goods and services and the ability to understand how to sell to the government.

One woman founder noted that since women entrepreneurs face challenges getting funding through investment, they tend to focus more on attracting customers, selling to them, and generating revenue so that they can make up for the lack of funding. This may explain why marketing and sales skills were the top two most mentioned skills in this category. Knowing how to price their products and services was also mentioned frequently as a skill women entrepreneurs want to learn. This aligns with previous research on this topic, where a survey of Black women entrepreneurs showed that while

83% of respondents strongly agreed that they were confident in running a business, only half somewhat agreed that they knew how to price their products and services.<sup>111</sup>

A recent survey by the Women Business Enterprises Canada Council revealed that while nearly half of the 130 suppliers who completed the survey gained new business opportunities through supplier certification, many SMEs, particularly those owned by women, still face challenges in fully leveraging these opportunities.<sup>112</sup> Women entrepreneurs are eager to tap into supplier diversity programs and engage in the global supply chain but often struggle to find the necessary support.<sup>113</sup> Studies show that Canadian women business owners are less likely to participate in international trade compared to their men counterparts.<sup>114</sup> This highlights the need for more accessible, timely, and consolidated information to help them navigate foreign markets effectively.

**Figure 7: Sales and Marketing Skills Development Needs of Women Entrepreneurs**



**Source:** Key Informant Interviews, ICTC.

<sup>111</sup> Mohamed Elmi et al., "The State of Women's Entrepreneurship: A Focus on Black Women Entrepreneurs" (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, Black Business and Professional Association, February 2021), [https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The\\_State\\_of\\_Womens\\_Entrepreneurship\\_Black\\_Entrepreneurs.pdf](https://wekh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The_State_of_Womens_Entrepreneurship_Black_Entrepreneurs.pdf), 21.

<sup>112</sup> Paul D. Larson, Jack D. Kulchitsky, and Silvia Pencak, "The State of WBE Certification in Canada: The Suppliers' Perspective" (WBE Canada, June 2021), <https://wbecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WBECertificationCanada2021Report.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> Barbara Orser, Catherine Elliott, and Wendy Cukier, Strengthening Ecosystem Supports for Women Entrepreneurs: Ontario Inclusive Innovation (I2) Action Strategy, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11623.50080>, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

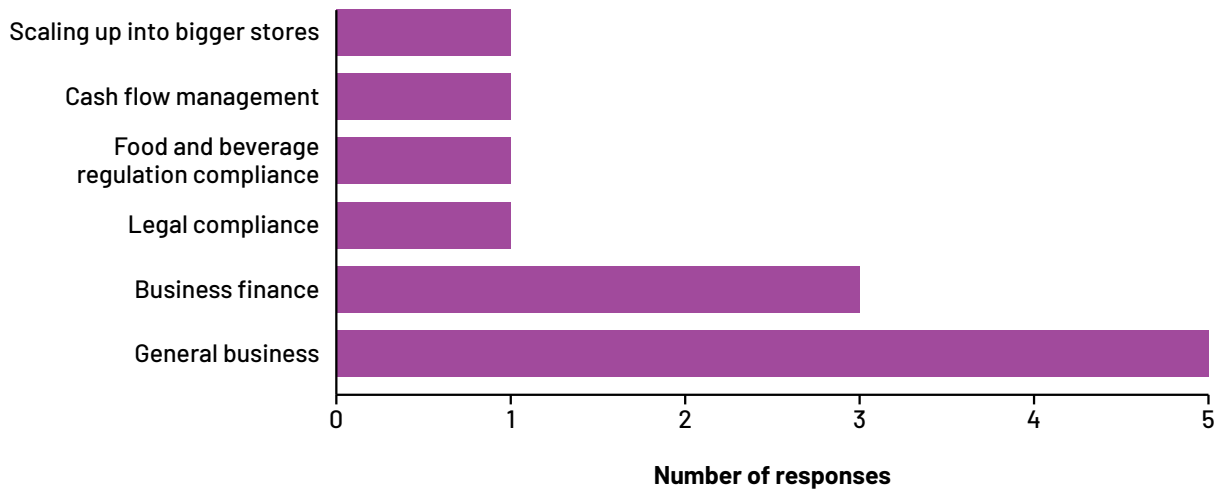


## Legal and Financial

When asking women entrepreneurs what sort of training and skills development is needed, the most common answer related to legal and financial matters was general business administration skills, followed

by business finance skills. Regulatory compliance skills were also mentioned by women entrepreneurs as a skillset they would like to develop.

**Figure 8: Legal and Financial Skills Development Needs of Women Entrepreneurs**



**Source:** Key Informant Interviews, ICTC.

## Mental and Emotional

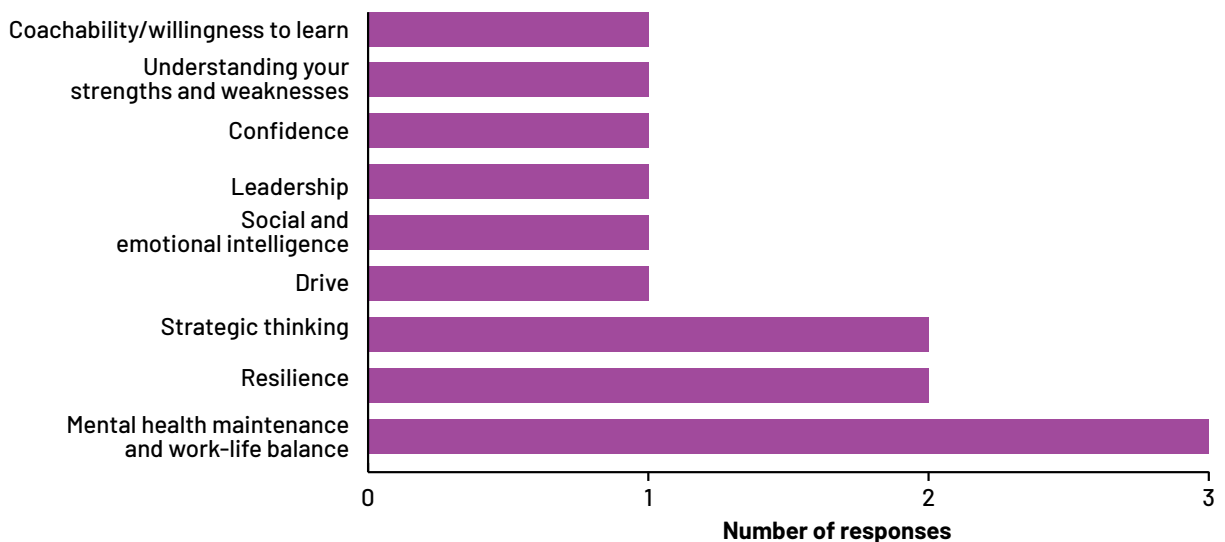
When asking women entrepreneurs what sort of training and skills development is needed, the most common answer related to mental and emotional skills was the ability to preserve one's mental health and maintain a work-life balance, followed by strategic thinking skills and resilience.

Interviewees emphasized that prioritizing mental health is essential, especially when navigating the challenging experiences that come with being a woman entrepreneur. Multiple interviewees stated that rather than wishing circumstances were different, it is important to confront the realities of your situation head-on. One interviewee added that in men-dominated spaces, instead of trying to blend in or mask their true self, women should acknowledge the discomfort that comes with being in those environments, adding that if you find yourself in an unsupportive setting, it's better to move on to a space where opportunities are more accessible, rather than wasting energy fighting to get support in that environment.

Interviewees offered many other pieces of advice for women entrepreneurs to maintain their mental health. They recommend cultivating tenacity and understanding that rejection doesn't equate to failure, since in business, "no" often simply means "not yet." They stressed the importance of creating systems that are individualized to best serve your business, rather than relying solely on traditional business advice or established norms. One interviewee noted that by embracing their unique strengths and moving away from the idea of being the "typical" entrepreneur or leader, women entrepreneurs can pave their own path to greater success.

Skills development and training are crucial for empowering women entrepreneurs to succeed in an increasingly competitive business landscape. Effective training programs help bridge knowledge gaps, providing women with the tools they need to innovate, make informed decisions, and adapt to market changes. Moreover, access to tailored skills development opportunities can women entrepreneurs to compete on equal footing with their men counterparts, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and diverse entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Figure 9: Mental and Emotional Skills Development Needs of Women Entrepreneurs**



**Source:** Key Informant Interviews, ICTC.





# CONCLUSION

It is apparent that women entrepreneurs play an important role in the growth of the Canadian economy especially in the scope of sustainable development and digital economy. They also prioritize social responsibility and community development over economic metrics in the markets. However, regardless of their contributions, women entrepreneurs are faced numerous challenges and need to overcome multiple hurdles at individual, organizational, and ecosystem-wide levels.

It is imperative to underscore the importance of using an intersectional approach in examining the experiences of women entrepreneurs because when factors like race and ethnicity, language, and economic status intersect with gender, it produces compounded challenges and opportunities.

There is a significant gap in data and research that looks at specifically Black women in Canada. These data gaps affect the complete understanding of the challenges that these groups encounter. Addressing these data gaps is important for developing effective policies and support programs. Canada is poised to develop a better and a deeper entrepreneurial landscape by providing targeted solutions to the problems faced by female entrepreneurs. This approach helps achieve economic productivity, enhance, and fulfill various sustainable development

objectives. Additionally, supporting women entrepreneurs can lead to a multiplier effect, as women often prioritize diversity and community support. Efforts to support and promote enterprises created by women especially through women and men owned businesses and the establishment of an equity driven society in Canada will be key in building a sustainable, innovative and economy for all Canadians.

Future research and policy development should focus on collecting disaggregated data to better understand and address the unique challenges experienced by diverse groups of women entrepreneurs. This targeted approach will lead to the development of more effective support programs and policies, thereby fostering a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem in Canada.



# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS THAT HELP WOMEN AND BLACK ENTREPRENEURS

Organization Name	Website
Alberta Women Entrepreneurs	<a href="http://www.awebusiness.com/">www.awebusiness.com/</a>
BDC	<a href="http://www.bdc.ca/en">www.bdc.ca/en</a>
Black Entrepreneurship Alliance	<a href="http://www.thebea.co/">www.thebea.co/</a>
Black Entrepreneurs Business Council	<a href="http://www.blackentrepreneursbc.org/">www.blackentrepreneursbc.org/</a>
Black Entrepreneurship Growth and Innovation Network	<a href="http://blacknorthbegin.ca/">blacknorthbegin.ca/</a>
BlackNorth Initiative	<a href="http://blacknorth.ca/">blacknorth.ca/</a>
Black Women Business Network	<a href="http://blackwomencanada.org/">blackwomencanada.org/</a>
Boundless Accelerator	<a href="http://boundlessaccelerator.ca/">boundlessaccelerator.ca/</a>
Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce	<a href="http://canwcc.ca/">canwcc.ca/</a>
Centre for Women in Business	<a href="http://www.centreforwomeninbusiness.ca/">www.centreforwomeninbusiness.ca/</a>
Coralus	<a href="http://www.coralus.world/">www.coralus.world/</a>
INNOVATEwest	<a href="http://innovatewest.tech/">innovatewest.tech/</a>
Ladies Who Lunch Ottawa (Facebook group)	<a href="http://www.facebook.com/groups/176315345896952/">www.facebook.com/groups/176315345896952/</a>
Leading Lenders	<a href="http://leadinglenders.ca/en/">leadinglenders.ca/en/</a>
Mosaic Accelerator	<a href="http://www.mosaicaccelerator.com/">www.mosaicaccelerator.com/</a>
Movement 51	<a href="http://www.movement51.org/">www.movement51.org/</a>
NEXT Canada	<a href="http://www.nextcanada.com/">www.nextcanada.com/</a>
Okanagan Women's Mentoring and Angel Network	<a href="http://www.okanaganwman.com/">www.okanaganwman.com/</a>
Ontario Centre for Innovation	<a href="http://www.oc-innovation.ca/">www.oc-innovation.ca/</a>
SheBoot	<a href="http://sheboot.ca/">sheboot.ca/</a>
The Forum	<a href="http://www.theforum.ca/">www.theforum.ca/</a>
Tribe Network	<a href="http://www.tribenetwork.ca/">www.tribenetwork.ca/</a>
UofT's Black Founders Network	<a href="http://entrepreneurs.utoronto.ca/for-entrepreneurs/black-founders-network/">entrepreneurs.utoronto.ca/for-entrepreneurs/black-founders-network/</a>
WeBC	<a href="http://we-bc.ca/">we-bc.ca/</a>
Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada	<a href="http://weoc.ca/">weoc.ca/</a>
Women's Equity Lab	<a href="http://womensequitylab.com/">womensequitylab.com/</a>
Women in Business New Brunswick	<a href="http://wbnb-fanb.ca/">wbnb-fanb.ca/</a>
Women of Influence	<a href="http://www.womenofinfluence.ca/">www.womenofinfluence.ca/</a>
Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network	<a href="http://svx.ca/initiatives/wosen/">svx.ca/initiatives/wosen/</a>



Program	Website
National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association's Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur program	<a href="http://nacca.ca/resources/iwe/">nacca.ca/resources/iwe/</a>
StartUp Canada's StartUp Women program	<a href="http://startupcan.ca/explore/startup-women/">startupcan.ca/explore/startup-women/</a>
Invest Ottawa's Ignition program	<a href="http://investottawa.ca/venture-path/ignition/">investottawa.ca/venture-path/ignition/</a>
DMZ's Black Innovation programs	<a href="http://dmz.torontomu.ca/bip/">dmz.torontomu.ca/bip/</a>
Communitech's program Fierce Founders	<a href="http://communitech.ca/how-we-help/fierce-founders/">communitech.ca/how-we-help/fierce-founders/</a>



## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This study used a mixed-methods research approach to identify the challenges, barriers, strategies and solutions to support women entrepreneurs.

### Secondary Research

#### Literature Review

The qualitative and quantitative portions of this project are supported by a thorough review of available literature and secondary data sources. The literature review helped shape the research methodology and questions and provided information to help further validate the findings in the report. The initial literature review helped identify interviewees for the research.

### Primary Research

#### Key Informant Interviews

The study comprised 30 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted between May and August 2024, involving a diverse range of participants: women entrepreneurs, representatives from organizations supporting women in business, and subject matter experts in entrepreneurship and diversity. Eight of the 30 KIIs were conducted with women from the Black community, and one KII was conducted with a woman from the Official Language Minority (OLM) community. The interviews collected data on the state of Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem, barriers for women when starting and scaling their businesses, and the effectiveness of current support programs and recommended solutions.

## LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

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While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Canada, particularly Black women in the digital economy, it is important to acknowledge several limitations:

- 1. Sample Size and Representation:** The study's qualitative approach, based on 30 KIIs, offers in-depth data but may not be fully representative of all women entrepreneurs in Canada. The trends identified should be interpreted as reflective of the interviewees' experiences rather than definitive for the entire digital economy.
- 2. Limited Coverage of Official Language Minority (OLM) communities:** The research did not extensively explore the intersections of gender and language minority status in entrepreneurship. Only one KII was conducted with a woman from an OLM community, which limits our understanding of this specific group's challenges and experiences.
- 3. Intersectionality Gaps:** While efforts were made to include diverse perspectives, the study may not fully capture the nuanced experiences of entrepreneurs across all intersections of identity, including various gender expressions and sexual orientations.
- 4. Geographic Representation:** The study may not equally represent experiences from all regions of Canada, potentially overlooking unique challenges faced by entrepreneurs in specific provinces or territories.
- 5. Sector-Specific Insights:** While focused on the digital economy, the research may not provide equal depth of insights across all sectors within the broad economy.







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