Pathways to Equity

Recommendations to Boost Women's Workforce Inclusion in the Digital Economy

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Women in Communications and Technology | Les femmes en communications et technologie

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Preface:

The **Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC)** is a neutral, not-for-profit, national centre of expertise with the mission of strengthening Canada's digital advantage in the global economy. For more than 30 years, ICTC has delivered forward-looking research, practical policy advice, and capacity-building solutions for individuals and businesses. The organization's goal is to ensure that technology is utilized to drive economic growth and innovation and that Canada's workforce remains competitive on a global scale.

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Women in Communications & Technology (WCT) is the leading Canadian organization in women's professional advancement, leveraging decades of expertise and a comprehensive approach to help employers retain and equip women and drive organizational change.

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Executive Summary

Canada is undergoing a period of profound economic and technological transformation. As advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and quantum computing reshape global markets and domestic industries, the federal government has committed significant investments through Budget 2025 to strengthen national capacity in key sectors of Canada's economy. Fully realizing the economic and productivity gains associated with these investments will depend on whether women, who comprise nearly half of Canada's workforce, can participate equitably in the sectors driving future growth.

Despite their strong educational attainment and substantial contributions to the labour market, women remain markedly underrepresented in many of the sectors central to Canada's economic strategy. This underrepresentation limits Canada's talent pipeline, constrains innovation capacity, and weakens long-term competitiveness.

The emergence of AI further compounds these challenges. Women are adopting AI tools at significantly lower rates than men. Without targeted intervention, these disparities risk widening labour market inequalities, reducing productivity, and undermining the economic gains women have achieved in recent decades. Women entrepreneurs face similar structural barriers. Women-owned businesses adopt emerging technologies at lower rates than men-owned firms, particularly in AI, where adoption rates are 1.7% for women-owned businesses compared with 4.4% for men-owned businesses. These gaps are driven by well-documented constraints, including limited access to financing, smaller average business size, and reduced internal capacity to integrate new technologies.

Canada has a strong foundation from which to address these challenges. Federal initiatives such as the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) and the Women's Economic and Leadership Opportunities Fund (WELO Fund) have mobilized billions in investment, supported thousands of women entrepreneurs, and advanced systemic change. However, the accelerating pace of technological transformation requires these programs to evolve to ensure women can fully participate in and benefit from Canada's AI-enabled economy.

To ensure economic transformation is inclusive, competitive, and resilient, this brief outlines six recommendations for the ecosystem supporting women's economic empowerment in Canada:

1. **Adopt a sector-specific approach to women-focused economic participation and workforce development programs** to accelerate women's entry, retention, and advancement in industries central to Canada's national economic strategy.

2. **Invest in targeted AI literacy and skills development** for women and girls to close the AI adoption gap and strengthen Canada's innovation and productivity capacity.

3. **Equip women-led enterprises with the digital and AI capabilities** required to scale, compete, and integrate into rapidly transforming sectors through existing program infrastructure such as the WES.

4 **Increase women's leadership in AI governance and standards-setting**, ensuring that Canada's AI frameworks reflect the full range of societal experiences and risks.

5 **Establish a national framework to capture and report gender-disaggregated data** on women's participation, advancement, and technology adoption across Canada's economy.

6 **Align industry incentives with inclusive AI adoption and workforce participation** through mechanisms such as tax incentives, gender-responsive procurement conditions, transparency reporting, and co-investment models that position industry as an active partner in advancing women's economic leadership.

These measures provide a coherent, evidence-based approach to ensuring that women are fully equipped to contribute to, and benefit from, Canada's economic and technological transformation.

> *As Angie Perez Thomas, a leader at AWS, said: mentors give perspective, sponsors create access, and we all need raving fans. And what we all really need right now are more sponsors for women to shape AI strategy. AI succeeds when diverse groups—women and men—are shaping the strategy, and when women have more opportunities in shaping AI, not only implementing it.*
>
> *- Sharon Di Sensi, Enterprise Sales Leader, Financial Services, AWS*



Left to right: Namir Anani, President & CEO, ICTC; Joyce Lafleur, National Technical Director, Cloud & AI Platforms, Microsoft; Sharon Di Sensi, Enterprise Sales Leader, Financial Services, AWS. WCT Leadership Excellence Awards Gala 2026

The State of Women in Resilience-Enabling Sectors

Canada's economy is at a critical inflection point. The convergence of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and quantum technologies, with shifting trade alliances and evolving geopolitical dynamics is rapidly reshaping the country's economic landscape. To capitalize on these changes and build a strong foundation for future growth, the Government of Canada's Budget 2025 outlines strategic investments in sectors and technologies essential to secure, sovereign, and resilient growth, including construction and housing, advanced manufacturing, energy and utilities, transportation and supply chains, defence, AI, and the quantum ecosystem.

Maximizing the impact of these investments will depend on fully leveraging Canada's talent base. Women represent a significant and highly educated segment of the workforce, comprising nearly half of all workers and more than half of post-secondary students. Their participation across high-growth and strategic sectors is essential to strengthening Canada's economic performance, innovation capacity, and global competitiveness.

However, women remain underrepresented in several sectors central to Canada's future economy. Women, at all levels, comprise 13.6% of Canada's construction and housing sector, 29% of its advanced manufacturing sector, and 19.8% of the energy and utilities sector.[1] In Canada's technology workforce, women comprise 32.6% of all occupations but only 11% of senior leadership positions and 9% of executive roles.[2]

Expanding women's economic participation across these areas represents a significant opportunity to deepen Canada's talent pool, address skills and labour shortages, and enhance productivity and innovation outcomes. Strengthening women's participation and leadership can support more robust decision-making, improved business performance, and stronger global positioning. Increasing representation at all levels, including in technical and leadership positions, will be important to ensuring these sectors reflect the full breadth of Canada's talent and perspectives.

A coordinated national approach to advancing women's economic participation and leadership can help ensure that the opportunities created through Budget 2025 translate into broad-based growth and competitiveness.

This includes supporting entry into high-demand fields, enabling career progression, and strengthening pathways into senior leadership roles. A McKinsey report found that for every 100 men promoted to manager-level roles, only 93 women are promoted, with wider gaps for women from underrepresented groups.[3] Ensuring that women can access and advance from entry-level positions to executive leadership is critical to unlocking Canada's full economic potential. ICTC's research has found that better gender equity in firms drives better business performance, higher productivity, and improved talent retention. For example, firms with greater gender diversity in executive leadership roles are 15% to 21% more likely to outperform their peers financially.[4] Promoting women's professional advancement is essential for economic growth and not only for achieving equity.

Canada has a generational opportunity to retool its economy for a more productive, resilient, and diversified future. Equipping women with the resources, supports, and initiatives to participate in this restructuring is necessary to realize Canada's full potential as well as reduce inequities.

1 BuildForce Canada. September 4, 2025. Reviewing Canada's construction sector in 2024 – Part 5: Building a strong workforce; Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters. Accessed March 19, 2026. Women in manufacturing; Careers in Energy. August 2024. Profile of women in Canada's energy industry.
2 Spiteri, S. April 2025. Closing the gap: Overcoming barriers to leadership for women in Canada's digital economy. Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).
3 Thomas, R. et al. , 2025. Women in the workplace 2025. McKinsey & Company.
4 Ivus, M., and O. Podolna. October 2024. Breaking barriers and building futures: Women entrepreneurs as catalysts for sustainable growth. Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).

Closing the AI Adoption Gap: Workforce Disruption, Entrepreneurship, and Leadership

Women are lagging behind men in workplace AI adoption. A Harvard Business Review study found that women are 22% less likely than men to use generative AI tools, primarily due to fewer learning opportunities and perceived penalties for using AI in the workplace.[5] A recent McKinsey study found that only 21% of entry-level women were encouraged by their managers to use AI, compared with 33% of entry-level men.[6] Within Canada, 46% of women expressed concerns about the consequences of using AI in the workplace compared with only 40% of men. Meanwhile, only 36% of women felt confident using AI compared to 52% of men.[7]

Furthermore, occupations traditionally held by women are more likely to be disrupted by AI. A report from Anthropic found that workers in the most AI-exposed professions tend to be older, female, more educated, and higher-paid.[8] Similarly, a report from the International Labour Organization found that women's jobs are disproportionately affected by AI due to women's overrepresentation in clerical and administrative roles.[9] In contrast, occupations in industries with comparatively lower rates of women's representation, such as construction, agriculture, transportation and logistics, and manufacturing, are less exposed to theoretical AI disruption.[10]

Addressing these systemic barriers, such as a lack of opportunity, perceived discrimination, and gendered workforce norms, requires a concerted effort between policymakers, industry, community organizations, service providers, and academia. Training women to effectively use AI in the workplace is essential to ensure they can stay ahead of AI disruption and, more importantly, benefit equally from AI through higher productivity, increased innovation, and greater agility. ICTC's research has found that, while many tasks in data, programming, helpdesk, and IT occupations are being automated, professionals can stay ahead by learning how to use AI critically and building competencies in both advanced digital and soft skills.[11] Furthermore, learning to use AI to automate rote tasks can empower women to take on more advanced, complex tasks critical to their professional growth.

The AI adoption gap doesn't only impact workers; it is also visible in the rate of technology adoption between women- and men-owned businesses. Women-owned businesses are less likely (12.7%) to use emerging technologies than men-owned businesses (16.4%); AI use, in particular, demonstrates a significant gap between women-owned (1.7%) and men-owned (4.4%) businesses.[12] The gap between women-owned and men-owned businesses in regards to advanced technologies is smaller, except for two subcategories: design or information control technologies and processing or fabrication technologies.[13]

5 Otis, N.G. et al. Accessed November 10, 2025. Global evidence on gender gaps and generative AI. Harvard Business School.
6 Thomas, R. et al. , 2025. Women in the workplace 2025. McKinsey & Company.
7 Talent Canada. March 13, 2026. Nearly half of women concerned about backlash from AI use at work: Survey.
8 Massenkoff, M., and P. McCrory. March 5, 2026. Labor market impacts of AI: A new measure and early evidence. Anthropic.
9 Tamayo, S.G., and A. Petrelli. June 2025. Work transformed: The promise and peril of artificial intelligence. International Labour Organization.
10 Massenkoff, M., and P. McCrory. March 5, 2026. Labor market impacts of AI: A new measure and early evidence. Anthropic.
11 Matthews, M., and F. Rice. 2024. Automation and the future of tech careers in Canada: What students need to know. Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).
12 Liu, H., and H. Faryaar. August 28, 2024. Technology adoption by women-owned businesses in Canada. Statistics Canada.
13 Ibid.

> *We know that AI is reshaping all of our jobs. That is going to continue to happen. The leadership norms and the organizational structures are what need attention.*
>
> *- Sharon Di Sensi, Enterprise Sales Leader, Financial Services, AWS*

The difference in digital technology adoption is attributable to two main causes:

- **High cost of adopting new technologies:** Canadian women entrepreneurs are less likely to have access to financial resources needed to fund technology adoption and access training to use technology.[14]
- **Smaller average business size:** Women-owned businesses tend to be smaller than men-owned businesses and thus struggle to adopt technology at the same rate. A lack of talent, budget, and the complexity of integration are often cited as barriers to technology adoption.[15]

Businesses that adopt digital technologies, such as cloud computing, big data, the Internet of things, robotics, AI, and additive manufacturing, experience higher growth, productivity, and competitiveness.[16] Empowering women-owned businesses to adopt emerging and advanced technologies is therefore critical to securing long-term growth, resilience, and competitiveness, lest they fall behind their men-owned business counterparts.

Engaging more women to take a leading role in AI governance, such as the framework of rules, ethical principles, and safety and technical standards that guide AI development, is one strategy to encourage women to use AI in the workplace and their businesses. Compared to men, women are more likely to have ethical or safety concerns about AI and to express ambivalence or uncertainty about specific AI uses.[17] Equipping women with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to lead AI governance strategies, both within their own workplaces and in the AI development ecosystem, can close the gap by empowering women to think critically about AI and to feel more confident in their AI competency and understanding.

Given the growing chasm in AI adoption and governance, empowering women to use AI is essential to closing the gender gap.

The rapid pace of AI development and adoption across sectors poses a threat to the economic and equity gains women have experienced in recent decades. Failing to close the gender gap in AI adoption carries significant economic and social risks that extend well beyond individuals and businesses. If women continue to face structural barriers to access AI tools, training, and leadership opportunities, labour market inequalities are likely to widen, limiting overall productivity gains and slowing innovation across sectors. Businesses that overlook these disparities risk entrenching biased systems, narrowing the diversity of perspectives that drive responsible AI development, and weakening their own competitiveness in an increasingly technology-driven economy. Furthermore, unequal access to AI threatens to reinforce existing gender inequities, reduce economic mobility, and undermine public trust in digital transformation. Addressing the gap through thoughtful, strategic, and evidence-based policy is thus a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable economic growth that benefits Canada.

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Gelles-Watnick, R. August 3, 2022. U.S. women more concerned than men about some AI developments, especially driverless cars. Pew Research Center.

International Strategies for Empowering Women's Economic and Technological Participation

Canada has a solid foundation on which to develop policies, programs, and initiatives to address the growing gaps in women's leadership, economic opportunities, and AI adoption. The Government of Canada has advanced several strategic initiatives to address economic inequality, including the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES), led by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED), and the Women's Economic and Leadership Opportunities Fund (WELO Fund), led by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE).

Since launching the WES in 2018, ISED has catalyzed more than $7 billion in investments and commissions to help women entrepreneurs access financing, networks, and expertise needed to scale up and expand their businesses. Through connected supports, such as the WES Ecosystem Fund, WES Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative, Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, and Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund, the strategy has issued more than 25,600 loans or grants to women entrepreneurs and hosted more than 3,700 networking and learning events.

Canada has an opportunity to leverage its existing programs and investments to foster systemic, nationwide progress for women. The Government of Canada, through ISED's WES, can accelerate women-led entrepreneurship in nationally strategic sectors, such as housing and construction, advanced manufacturing, defence, energy and utilities, and transportation. Doing so is critical to ensuring that women benefit from Canada's economic investments.

Similarly, WAGE's WELO Fund has distributed up to $100 million in funding to address systemic barriers to women's economic participation and success. These barriers include harassment, discrimination, limited access to mentors and networks, and a lack of flexible work arrangements. The WELO Fund supported 160 organizations across Canada to deliver systemic change projects, including initiatives that changed gender norms and attitudes, supported shifts in authority and decision-making power, and encouraged more equitable and effective resource sharing.

Building on these successes to address systemic barriers to women's equitable participation in the AI economy is critical to ensuring Canada continues to make progress on the issues that impact women.

Given the decline in business-led equity and inclusivity initiatives since 2018, there is an opportunity for the Government of Canada to proactively guide industry partners toward capacity-building programs that support women's access to advanced and emerging technologies.

> *AI skilling is no longer just a technical conversation—it's a business transformation conversation. It's about bringing every function into that conversation.*
>
> *- Joyce Lafleur,*
> *National Technical Director — Cloud & AI Platforms,*
> *Microsoft*

Canada can look to several internationally recognized initiatives that are actively empowering women entrepreneurs in these sectors and training women with AI skills and leadership and governance capabilities to become future leaders. These programs span education, workforce development, policy engagement, and community-building. Examples follow.

Women Leaders in AI & Standards:

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the UN agency responsible for global digital and AI standards. As the lead convenor of the AI for Good United Nations initiative, the ITU convened the Women leaders in AI & standards program that brought together global experts to define how women participate in shaping AI governance, technical standards, and regulatory frameworks. The program generated evidence-based recommendations for governments and companies, with a focus on increasing women's participation in AI governance and standards development.

Women in AI:

Women in AI (WAI) is one of the most influential global initiatives advancing women's leadership in the AI ecosystem, combining community-building with concrete programs that expand access, skills, and visibility. Through its global chapters, WAI delivers mentorship networks that pair emerging talent with senior AI professionals, offers technical upskilling through workshops and hackathons, and runs leadership accelerators designed to prepare women for governance and executive roles in AI-driven sectors. The organization also provides policy engagement platforms, such as the Women in AI Global Summit and regional policy labs, that connect women experts with governments and industry on responsible AI development. Its flagship programs, including WAI Educate and WAI Research, help broaden participation by offering training for girls and women entering the field and supporting women-led research teams working on ethical and socially beneficial AI applications.

Women at the Table:

Women at the Table (W@TT) is a globally recognized organization that accelerates women's leadership in sectors where they have historically been excluded—particularly in technology, AI governance, peace and security, climate, and the economy—by ensuring women are present where and when decisions are made. W@TT leads the Gender Gap App, a methodology that helps institutions identify structural barriers and redesign systems to be gender-inclusive from the outset. It also co-founded the International Gender Champions network, which brings together heads of organizations, ambassadors, and senior leaders who commit to concrete, measurable actions that advance gender equality in their institutions. Through its feminist AI and inclusive algorithms initiatives, W@TT works with governments, researchers, and technologists to embed gender-responsive design into AI systems and governance frameworks.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Adopt a sector-specific approach to women-focused economic participation and workforce development programs to accelerate women's entry, retention, and advancement in industries central to Canada's national economic strategy.

Budget 2025 outlines a coordinated national commitment to building capacity in select sectors, including construction and housing, advanced manufacturing, energy and utilities, defence, and AI.[18] Realizing the full return on Canada's strategic investments will depend on whether women have equitable access to the employment and business opportunities these policies create.

As noted, despite constituting nearly 50% of Canada's workforce, women are disproportionately underrepresented in these sectors, comprising fewer than 20% of Canada's housing and construction and energy and utilities workforce and just 32.6% of Canada's technology workforce. Additionally, women are less likely to reach senior management and leadership levels in these industries. McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2025 report found that for every 100 men promoted to manager-level roles, only 93 women are promoted, with wider gaps for women from underrepresented groups.[19] The promotion gap is more pronounced for women who face compounding barriers such as race, newcomer status, disability, or other intersecting identities.

Canada can look to other countries that have taken steps to address this dynamic. In December 2025, the United Kingdom launched its Women in Tech taskforce, a government–industry initiative that gathers senior figures from across the technology ecosystem to identify and dismantle barriers to women's entry, progression, and leadership in tech. Backed by a £4 million ($7.4 million) skills program providing paid work placements for 300 women at small- and medium-sized enterprises, the taskforce also launched a formal call for evidence to shape future policy on women and emerging technologies, including AI.[20]

Deploying a one-size-fits-all approach to advancing women's participation is unlikely to reach those who need support most. Instead, Canada has an opportunity to build on its existing women's programming infrastructure to drive structural change at the organizational level. Refining programs such as WAGE's WELO Fund to direct dedicated funding toward sector-specific programming in industries that are nationally important, but where women are underrepresented, including construction and housing, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, defence, and technology, can stimulate women's workforce participation while also addressing longstanding skill and labour shortages.

Priority areas for investment could include established best practices, such as mentorship and sponsorship infrastructure in sectors undergoing rapid workforce transformation; practical tools and capacity-building support for small- and medium-sized enterprises to attract and retain women in technical roles; and stronger connections between industry, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations to widen the talent pipeline at every stage.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Invest in targeted AI literacy and skills development for women and girls to close the AI adoption gap and strengthen Canada's innovation and productivity capacity.

Only 36% of women in Canada report feeling confident using AI tools, compared with 52% of men. This gap reflects a pattern of unequal access to learning opportunities and workplace encouragement that, if left unaddressed, will widen as AI becomes more central to how work is organized across sectors.

18 Department of Finance Canada. November 2025. Budget 2025: Canada strong. Government of Canada.
19 Thomas R. et al. 2025. Women in the workplace 2025. McKinsey & Company.
20 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. December 16, 2025. Launch of Women in Tech taskforce. GOV.UK.

Women who develop strong AI literacy and skills are better positioned to undertake more complex, oversight-oriented tasks that research indicates will grow in demand as routine work becomes increasingly automated.[21] Furthermore, skills training programs designed with women's specific barriers in mind have demonstrated measurable results in comparable contexts, including improvements in adoption rates and longer-term retention in technology-adjacent roles.[22]

Addressing the AI adoption gap through comprehensive women- and girls-focused AI literacy and skills training can make a meaningful and measurable difference in women's confidence and skills, thereby driving AI adoption and generating downstream economic benefits through improved productivity and greater innovation.

Collaboration is needed among workforce development organizations, post-secondary institutions, industry, and government to strategically invest in women- and girls-focused AI literacy programming in three segments:

1) For workers in AI-exposed occupations, such as women in administrative and clerical roles, upskilling and reskilling initiatives should focus on applied AI training, including responsible and critical AI use, through existing workforce development infrastructure.

2) For managers, employers, and business leaders, training should equip leaders with the knowledge and tools to actively encourage women's AI adoption in the workplace and to design AI-enabling environments, which would support systemic change across organizations and sectors.

3) For students, youth, and early-career women, initiatives should embed AI competencies and skills training into secondary and post-secondary education, coupled with work-integrated learning opportunities, so the next generation enters the labour market with the confidence, skills, and capability that employers increasingly require.

Furthermore, given the diverse barriers and challenges facing women across Canada, all programming should be developed in partnership with organizations that have expertise serving women from diverse backgrounds, including racialized women, newcomer women, and Indigenous women. By adopting a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) approach, Canada can ensure that women experiencing intersectional barriers are supported in ways that generic programming is unlikely to address.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Equip women-led enterprises and women leaders with the digital and AI capabilities required to scale, compete, and integrate into rapidly transforming sectors through existing program infrastructure such as the WES.

Women-owned businesses are less likely to use emerging technologies (12.7%) than men-owned businesses (16.4%), with a particularly pronounced gap in AI adoption (1.7% compared to 4.4%, respectively).[23] Women are also less likely to use AI in the workplace. The reasons for the discrepancy are well documented: women entrepreneurs, who tend to operate small businesses, face higher relative costs of technology adoption while having less access to the financing needed to fund it. Additionally, women's smaller average business sizes limit internal capacity to integrate new technologies into existing business processes.

While these barriers are common, they are not intractable. Interested Canadians can look to international evidence on the effectiveness of targeted, practical digital adoption support delivered through trusted intermediaries, particularly when programming is sector-relevant and paired with access to affordable financing.[24]

Canada's WES and the ecosystem of partners and providers it has developed has the reach and organizational infrastructure to serve as the delivery mechanism for this kind of support. The strategy has issued more than 25,600 loans and grants to women entrepreneurs and catalyzed over $7 billion in investments. Extending the strategy to make technology-led scale-up a core program objective would build directly on that foundation.

In practice, this means developing accessible AI and digital technology adoption and implementation training for women leaders and women entrepreneurs through WES community partners,

21 UNESCO. 2024. UNESCO women for ethical AI: Outlook study on artificial intelligence and gender.
22 Otis, N.G. et al. Accessed November 10, 2025. Global evidence on gender gaps and generative AI. Harvard Business School.
23 Liu, H., and H. Faryaar. August 28, 2024. Technology adoption by women-owned businesses in Canada. Statistics Canada.
24 OECD. 2023. OECD SME and entrepreneurship outlook 2023.

expanding financing options through the Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund for technology investment, and creating targeted incentives for women-led enterprises in sectors where digital transformation is accelerating most rapidly. Equipping women-led businesses and women leaders with the digital capabilities to compete globally strengthens Canada's overall innovation capacity and productivity as well as individual enterprises.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Increase women's leadership in AI governance and standards-setting, ensuring that Canada's AI frameworks reflect the full range of societal experiences and risks.

The frameworks, standards, and regulations that govern how AI is developed and deployed will shape economic and social outcomes for decades. Canada has already invested in building inclusive governance infrastructure: the Advisory Council on Artificial Intelligence, established in 2019, was mandated to examine how Canada can advance AI in an open, transparent, and human rights-centred manner.[25] Similarly, the development of the Artificial Intelligence and Data Act has included broad consultations engaging industry, academia, and civil society.[26] These processes reflect that AI governance is a shared responsibility that must be informed by diverse parties.

The evidence suggests, however, that women remain significantly underrepresented in AI governance bodies and standards-setting processes more broadly.[27] This has direct impacts on the quality of outcomes. For example, women are more likely than men to raise concerns about the safety, fairness, and societal implications of AI. The inclusion of women's perspectives is essential to the development of robust and equitable AI governance frameworks, ensuring that regulatory approaches account for the full range of societal experiences and risks, particularly given the disproportionate impacts, threats, and vulnerabilities that AI systems can impose on different demographic groups.

Canada has active opportunities to address this gap. National consultations on AI regulation, the development of technical standards, and the composition of advisory bodies all represent concrete points of intervention. The Government of Canada, working with regulatory bodies, standards organizations, and industry, should establish transparency and diversity expectations for AI governance processes, invest in leadership development programs that equip women with the policy and technical knowledge to participate meaningfully in standards-setting discussions, and support organizations building the pipeline of women leaders in AI governance domestically and through Canada's participation in international standards forums. Without concerted efforts to include women's perspectives, Canada's AI frameworks and regulations are likely to overlook their distinct viewpoints, concerns, and opportunities, thereby reducing the effectiveness of policies responsible for ensuring that AI systems and tools benefit all of Canadian society.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Establish a national framework to capture and report gender-disaggregated data on women's participation, advancement, and technology adoption across Canada's economy.

Effective policy requires rigorous and consistent measurement. While Canada's existing statistical infrastructure, including the Labour Force Survey and other Statistics Canada instruments, provides valuable insights into women's representation across sectors and occupations, there is currently no comprehensive, standardized, and publicly reported framework for tracking women's career progression, technology adoption patterns, or long-term outcomes of publicly funded programs to advance women's economic participation. In the absence of such a framework, it is difficult to determine where investments are yielding results, disparities are widening, and policy adjustments are required.

A national approach to gender-disaggregated data collection and reporting would enable Canada to identify emerging gaps in real time and respond proactively before systemic barriers become entrenched. International models demonstrate

25 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. 2019. Advisory council on Artificial Intelligence. Government of Canada.

26 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. Accessed March 25, 2026. Artificial Intelligence and Data Act (AIDA) companion document. Government of Canada.

27 UNESCO. 2024. UNESCO women for ethical AI: Outlook study on artificial intelligence and gender. The report notes that, of more than 1,000 AI policy initiatives tracked by the OECD AI Policy Observatory, only 47 specifically identified women as a social group of emphasis, and that gender equality ranked among the lowest-performing areas in the Global Index on Responsible AI.

the value of such infrastructure. For example, the European Institute for Gender Equality's Gender Equality Index provides governments and institutions with a consistent, comparative mechanism for monitoring progress and informing evidence-based policy interventions.[28]

To strengthen accountability and support continuous improvement, the Government of Canada, through Statistics Canada; WAGE; and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED), should develop a national framework for gender and technology participation data. This framework should establish consistent metrics for representation, advancement, and technology adoption across strategic sectors. Additionally, the framework should produce regular, publicly accessible reporting disaggregated by sector, career stage, and business ownership. Also, to strengthen industry and public accountability, the framework should link program funding decisions to demonstrated outcomes and measurable progress. Furthermore, to facilitate systemic change, large employers and organizations receiving public funding should be required to contribute to this effort by reporting transparently on gender representation in technology-related and leadership roles. Building this accountability infrastructure now will ensure that federal investments in women's economic participation generate a durable foundation for long-term, systemic progress in addition to immediate benefits.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Align industry incentives with inclusive AI adoption and workforce participation, including mechanisms such as tax incentives, procurement conditions, reporting requirements, and co-investment models.

Government action alone cannot address persistent sectoral gaps in women's participation, leadership, and access to advanced and emerging technologies. Applying an ecosystem approach that engages industry leaders and relevant parties as contributors and partners is necessary to ensure that transformational change is effective and long-lasting. The business case for this is well established: a 2023 BlackRock analysis found that the most gender-diverse workforces outperformed their less-diverse counterparts by an average annual rate of 29%.[29]

Peer jurisdictions offer instructive models: Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Amendment (Setting Gender Equality Targets) Bill 2024 is the first legislation of its kind globally, requiring employers with at least 500 employees to set and demonstrate improvement against their gender equity targets every three years. Organizations that do not show progress without reasonable cause risk being publicly documented by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.[30]

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has documented how gender-responsive procurement conditions, including supplier diversity targets and subcontracting requirements for women-owned businesses, can use governments' buying power to signal change to large employers and their supply chains.[31]

Fiscal levers have also proven effective. According to OECD evidence, tax incentives reliably shape private sector investment behaviour toward nationally strategic priorities.[32] This approach reduces the effective cost of eligible activities and increases uptake among organizations of all sizes.[33] Canada has shown that co-investment models work in this space: in 2022–2023, the WES Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative facilitated 48 venture capital investments in funds and companies focused on women, Indigenous, and racialized entrepreneurs. This represented $143.4 million in capital deployed.

The Government of Canada, in collaboration with industry associations, financial institutions, and large employers, can build on this foundation by expanding co-investment vehicles tied to AI adoption, introducing gender equity considerations into federal procurement criteria, and encouraging larger employers to adopt transparent reporting on women's representation in technology and AI roles, thereby drawing on established international models to define consistent and practical standards.

28 European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). 2025. Gender equality index.
29 BlackRock. November 2023. Lifting global growth by investing in women.
30 MinterEllison. December 2024. Australia enacts world's first workplace gender equality targets mandate.
31 OECD. 2021. Promoting gender equality through public procurement.
32 OECD. 2023. The impact of R&D tax incentives: Results from the OECD microBeRD+ project. OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers. 159.
33 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. 2023. Women entrepreneurship strategy: Progress report 2023. Government of Canada.

Conclusion

The six recommendations outlined in this policy brief are intended to help Canada fully realize the economic and productivity gains of its significant investments in key sectors of the Canadian economy. Women's underrepresentation across these sectors—at all levels, from entry-level workers to business leaders and entrepreneurs—limits Canada's talent pipeline, constrains innovation capacity, and weakens long-term competitiveness. Targeted interventions to boost women's economic and workforce participation are needed to address the risk of widening labour market inequalities, further reductions in productivity, and undermining the economic gains women have achieved in recent decades.



By supporting women's economic empowerment across sectors central to Canada's economic strategy and addressing compounding challenges in technology adoption, Canada can ensure its vision for economic transformation is competitive, resilient, and inclusive.