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Early Stages of Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship

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The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) is a national network and accessible digital platform for sharing research and resources, and leading strategies. With 10 regional hubs and a network of more than 250 organizations, WEKH is designed to address the needs of diverse women entrepreneurs across regions and across sectors. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, WEKH adopted an agitator role connecting women entrepreneurs and support organizations across the country, and led network calls and training sessions. WEKH's advanced technology platform, powered by Magnet, enhances the capacity of women entrepreneurs and the organizations who serve them by linking them to resources and best practices across the country.

With the support of the Government of Canada, WEKH spreads its expertise from coast to coast, enabling service providers, academics, government and industry to enhance their support for women entrepreneurs. Toronto Metropolitan University's Diversity Institute, in collaboration with the Ted Rogers School of Management, is leading a team of researchers, business support organizations and key stakeholders to create a more inclusive and supportive environment to grow women's entrepreneurship in Canada.



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Canadian Council for Indigenous Business (CCIB) is committed to the full participation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada's economy. As a national, non-partisan association, CCIB has a mission to promote, strengthen and enhance a prosperous Indigenous economy through the fostering of business relationships, opportunities and awareness. CCIB offers knowledge, resources and programs to its members to foster economic opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and businesses across Canada.

CCIB research continuously strives to support Indigenous communities and companies in Canada. Their work is used to develop policies and programs for federal and provincial governments and corporate Canada. Identifying how Indigenous businesses can take part in supply chains, making meaningful connections through networking events, and developing customized business lists of relevant Indigenous companies are just a few ways CCIB research can help support the Indigenous economy in Canada. The goal is to assist in fostering meaningful relationships with Indigenous Peoples, businesses and communities for organizations.

Sponsors

Sponsors of this project include the Government of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



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About the illustrations

The cover and additional report graphics were designed by CCIB associate, marketing and communications, Jolene Arcand, a proud Métis with a mixed ancestry of Nehiyaw (Cree), Haudenosaunee (Mohawk), French and Scottish descent, residing in the traditional territory of the Cowichan First Nation. The cover design uses a modern interpretation of traditional Indigenous woodland art. The relationship between Indigenous women and the moon is central to this motif, from the influence of the tides to the guiding presence of the grandmother moon. The bear symbolizes women's strength through hardship and the resilience of Indigenous women in entrepreneurship.

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Executive Summary



This report is a collaboration between the Canadian Council for Indigenous Business (CCIB) and the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) through the Diversity Institute (DI) to deliver research that aims to understand the early stages of Indigenous women's entrepreneurship in Ontario. This report is a followup study to previous collaborations between CCIB and WEKH called the *Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs* report.

The study explores themes like motivations, support services accessed, government services, financing and early-stage challenges. It aims to identify the unique experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurs and critical areas of support that need further attention in the public and private sectors.

In partnership with DI, CCIB conducted a literature review to provide insight into the entrepreneurial landscape for Indigenous women-owned businesses in Canada and an environmental scan of available supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 16 Indigenous women entrepreneurs from different Indigenous communities who have passed the initial start-up phase and can reflect on their experiences as

business owners. The literature review and environmental scan provide the necessary background for the report. The in-depth interviews allow us to explore how Indigenous women transform ideas into businesses, as well as the obstacles and opportunities they encounter along the way.

The interviews

This study conducted interviews with 16 Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Ontario whose businesses have moved beyond the ideation stage of generating and refining ideas toward an established stage with a stable and operational market presence. Our goal in the interviews was to explore the lived experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurs including their motivations, challenges, processes and resources used during the early stages of their business.

Participants were asked about their:

- > Insights about entrepreneurial training and the type of training they had accessed
- > Access to financial and other business resources
- > Mentorship
- > Networking opportunities
- > Support organizations.

Interview key findings

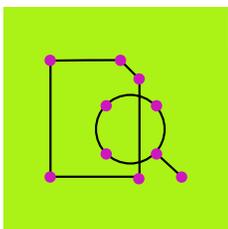
- > Entrepreneurship holds profound potential as a pathway to economic and community prosperity for Indigenous women in Canada, offering a means of self-determination and empowerment. Many Indigenous women entrepreneurs cite giving back to their communities as their motivation for starting a business. Their entrepreneurial endeavours often start when they identify existing gaps in the community, such as a need for educational services. This inspires them to start businesses that address these gaps and can contribute to the improvement of socio-economic conditions within their communities.
- > Many Indigenous women entrepreneurs who live on-reserve or in remote areas do not have access to affordable training programs. Challenges to accessing programs include lack of infrastructure and reliable Internet for online services, insufficient transportation, family-related responsibilities (Elders and/or child care) and a lack of affordable training options.
- > Many Indigenous women entrepreneurs use personal savings to finance their businesses. This is due to a lack of credit history, lack of awareness of financial resources, high loan interest rates, complicated applications, and strict lending requirements. The Indian Act created restrictions on accessing financial support that have further inhibited First Nations Peoples from contributing to non-Indigenous economies. For example, Section 89 of the Indian Act prohibits the use of property on First Nations reserves to be used as collateral. The effects of this are still felt for many First Nations women entrepreneurs who are having difficulties securing financial support from traditional financial institutions.
- > Financial literacy and communications are barriers for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, who often express the need for training in these areas.
- > Mentors and mentorship are viewed as key pieces in gathering valuable business advice and guidance. Indigenous women appreciate mentorship from individuals who have similar life experiences and perspectives, such as understanding of on-reserve business operations.
- > Indigenous women entrepreneurs cite networking as one of the most important factors in the early stages of developing a business. However, networking events can be unaffordable or difficult to access.
- > Indigenous women note the importance of having women-only spaces for networking or other business-related events. Many women have faced inappropriate, condescending, aggressive and even racist comments from men. This has deterred them from wanting to attend conferences or engaging in conversations with potential connections.
- > Indigenous women-owned businesses skew toward service-based industries because of systemic barriers in other industries.

Introduction



Indigenous entrepreneurship is an important contributor to the Canadian economy. The Indigenous population is one of the fastest-growing populations in Canada and the rise of Indigenous-owned businesses is significantly contributing to the economic landscape.¹ There are about 75,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada, with some expanding into non-traditional sectors as a key component to economic reconciliation.^{2,3} Along with this upward trend, Indigenous women's entrepreneurship has been increasing, as 33% of Indigenous businesses are women-owned.^{4,5}

Indigenous Peoples have been trading, creating and procuring since time immemorial. Thriving Indigenous economies were essential to survival, safety and culture prior to European settlement.⁶ Indigenous women played critical roles and were recognized as central to the well-being of families and communities, as most Indigenous societies were matriarchal. Targeted racism, gender discrimination and colonial systems aimed to assimilate Indigenous Peoples based on a European model and a patriarchal lens. Initial colonial assumptions resulted in the drastic alteration of women's influence in society in a short time period.⁷ Despite these circumstances, Indigenous women are reclaiming their important roles and dismantling barriers through economic reconciliation in the form of entrepreneurship.



There are about 75,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada, with some

expanding into non-traditional sectors as a key component to economic reconciliation. Along with this upward trend, Indigenous women's entrepreneurship has been increasing, as 33% of Indigenous businesses are women-owned.



“When Indigenous Peoples thrive, Canada also thrives. With more and more businesses launching with Indigenous women leading them, the more we see prosperity come back to the original Peoples of this land, and by doing so creating a new path forward for the next generation. After all, that’s how we ‘change the narrative.’”

– **Nicole Robertson**, President and Chief Communications Specialist of Muskwa Productions and Consulting

The objective of this research is to understand the unique experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurship in Ontario by examining the first stages of Indigenous women owners’ businesses. It identifies barriers and opportunities, as well as supports, for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. In doing so, the analysis contributes to existing policies and initiatives that promote Indigenous women’s entrepreneurship and provides recommendations on how support can and should be further developed. Recognizing early onset challenges and hardships faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs allows us to identify critical areas of support that need further attention from public and private sectors that will allow for continued growth.

Entrepreneurship is a challenging path, especially in the early stages of business, yet Indigenous women are becoming entrepreneurs and starting enterprises at twice the rate of non-Indigenous women.⁸

Despite this growth, Indigenous women's roles and experiences in entrepreneurship have been understudied due to the historical barriers that have prevented the recognition of their entrepreneurial potential.⁹ Indigenous Peoples in Canada have experienced generations of discrimination, leading to socio-economic gaps, as well as limited educational and economic opportunities and access to resources.¹⁰ Indigenous women in particular face barriers related to geographic isolation, systemic exclusion and a lack of networking connections.¹¹ Therefore, it is essential that support is available to Indigenous entrepreneurs.^{12, 13}

"Women are elemental in the achievement of Indigenous economic prosperity, yet securing affordable financing remains one of the most arduous challenges for Indigenous women entrepreneurs"

- Tabatha Bull, President and CEO of the Canadian Council for Indigenous Business (CCIB).¹⁴

Several surveys conducted by the CCIB provide insight into the entrepreneurial landscape for Indigenous business across Canada, including those that are majority-owned by women. While these surveys cannot be considered entirely representative of the collective experiences of Indigenous entrepreneurs in Canada, the data collected does provide some insights.

According to the *2019 Ontario Aboriginal Business Survey*, which included responses from 67 Indigenous women entrepreneurs, Indigenous women-owned businesses were concentrated in service-based industries. These include retail trade (25%), accommodation and food services (12%), and professional, scientific and technical services (12%). These statistics suggest that service-based industries were more accessible for the Indigenous women entrepreneurs surveyed and more aligned with their skill sets, expertise and interests.¹⁵

The most common source of start-up financing for Indigenous women-owned businesses was personal savings (63%), followed by business loans or lines of credit from financial institutions (9%), and Indigenous lending agencies or capital corporations (9%). These findings suggest that the Indigenous women entrepreneurs surveyed faced significant barriers to accessing capital or financing from traditional financial institutions, such as banks.¹⁶

The survey also found that 18% of the Indigenous women entrepreneurs surveyed reported being extremely successful, 51% were very successful, 28% were somewhat successful, and 3% not very successful. Indigenous women identified several reasons for the success of their businesses, which included customer service (16%), good reputation and recognition (13%), and demand for their product (11%). These results implied that the Indigenous women entrepreneurs prioritized building strong relationships with customers and developing a strong image for their brand that allowed for repeat customers and further business growth.¹⁷



Insights into how Indigenous women entrepreneurs navigated the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were gathered in a subsequent survey whose results were published in an October 2021 CCIB report titled *COVID-19 Indigenous Business Survey - Phase II: Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs*. The CCIB, the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) and the National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEDB) conducted a Canada-wide survey of Indigenous entrepreneurs between Dec. 18, 2020 and Feb. 2, 2021. The survey was designed and administered by CCIB to understand the challenges that Indigenous businesses faced in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 825 surveys were completed, with 326 of these responses submitted by Indigenous women entrepreneurs.¹⁸

Almost three-quarters (72%) of Indigenous women entrepreneurs said that their business operations were negatively impacted by the pandemic. This is due in large part to almost two-thirds (65%) of Indigenous women-owned businesses being in the service industry, a sector that was hit hard due to reliance on face-to-face customer interaction to generate revenue. In fact, the most common business impact of COVID-19 pandemic reported by Indigenous women entrepreneurs was a decrease in revenue (63%).¹⁹

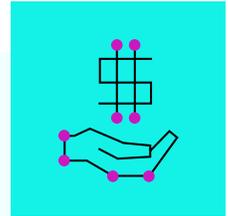
Almost three-quarters (74%) of Indigenous women entrepreneurs required financial assistance because of the pandemic. Almost one-half (45%) stated that their business would not last more than six months without financial support and slightly over one-half (51%) stated that they would need up to \$50,000 to get through the next six months. The most common types of lending relationships for Indigenous women entrepreneurs were with Indigenous financial institutions (IFIs)

(25%), large financial institutions such as banks (21%) and federal government agencies (11%). However, almost one-half (47%) of Indigenous women entrepreneurs reported no current lending relationships with any financial institutions. These findings highlight the ongoing struggle of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in attempting to access capital through traditional Western financial services and meeting basic loan approval criteria.²⁰

Financial support is an important component to succeed as an entrepreneur in Western society. However, Indigenous women prioritize a balance of the four levels of self to realize sustainable success: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. This holistic Indigenous guiding principle is not reflected in mainstream Western organizations or institutions. Financial institutions, educational facilities, mentors, networks and communities could support Indigenous women entrepreneurs' success by providing opportunities to reclaim all four levels of balance. By shifting perspective to that of the Indigenous women entrepreneurs, there is an evident lack of support by Western organizations in addressing the entrepreneurs' priorities and needs of restoring balance for their families and communities through their businesses.

To understand the current landscape of Indigenous women's entrepreneurship, this report builds upon previous research from the *Breaking Barriers: A Decade of Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada* report,²¹ and the annual *State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada* reports from 2020-24. To understand how an Indigenous woman transforms an idea

The most common types of lending relationships for Indigenous women entrepreneurs were with:



- > Indigenous financial institutions (IFIs) (25%)
- > large financial institutions such as banks (21%)
- > federal government agencies (11%)

into a business, we analyze the success factors at the initial stages of a business such as entrepreneurial motivations, support services accessed, government services accessed, financing, and early-stage challenges. To supplement our analysis, we conducted interviews with 16 Indigenous woman entrepreneurs who have passed the initial start-up phase (businesses that are at least two years old) and can provide insights on their experiences as business owners. It is critical to understand the underlying issues about the barriers that Indigenous women are facing. To do so, we must first learn about their businesses and the gaps that are preventing them from achieving success.

Background & Context



Entrepreneurship and colonialism: A literature review

Indigenous women are starting businesses at twice the rate of non-Indigenous Canadian women.²² Entrepreneurship is a way for Indigenous women to increase financial independence and stability, while balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Entrepreneurship is perceived as an opportunity to “raise their family’s quality of life and improve their community’s socio-economic circumstances.”²³ Demonstrated by their high levels of entrepreneurship, Indigenous women have proven themselves to be successful, innate leaders, and a source of inspiration for the next generations.²⁴

Stemming from colonial policies, Indigenous women face complex systemic, institutional and financial barriers disproportionate to those of other entrepreneurs. For context, prior to European contact, many Indigenous societies were matrilineal and had thriving economies, communities and governance structures.²⁵ Women were at the centre of the family and participated in the development of communities, including in leadership roles.²⁶ Indigenous women turned to communities for support and in turn

supported their communities. In accordance with patriarchal attitudes of colonial governments, Indigenous women were devalued in social systems. Policies instilled in the Indian Act from 1876 onwards have led to geographic and economic isolation, financial dependence, and widespread suffering for Indigenous women.²⁷ The challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples today are a direct result of the colonial policies that undermined political and economic sovereignty.²⁸

Challenges faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs include:

- > Inability to qualify for a loan from mainstream financial institutions, lack of collateral, lack of access to capital for equity, and lack of credit
- > Inability to work full-time in businesses
- > Lack of related education
- > Lack of confidence
- > Lack of access to male-dominated fields
- > Accessibility difficulties from living in rural and remote communities
- > Caregiving roles in families and communities.²⁹

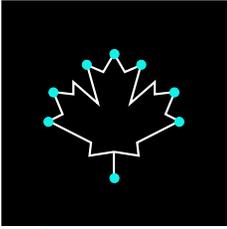
For a full understanding, these issues must be examined at a deeper level. The most overarching barrier Indigenous entrepreneurs face are financial hurdles in the start-up phase. These include lack of collateral, being a high-risk business, having too much debt, or poor credit ratings.³⁰ Section 89 of the Indian Act established barriers to accessing credit, stunting the creation of new businesses in First Nations communities. In 2013, NACCA reported that out of all capital financing provided in Canada, First Nations, Inuit and

Métis businesses accessed only 0.2%.³¹ These financial restrictions deteriorate the economic prosperity and financial freedom that can be brought with entrepreneurship, yet they continue to be enshrined in Canadian federal policy. Women are more likely to start smaller businesses that do not require large amounts of capital, but few financial institutions offer the microloans that would support them.³²

Further, financing through mainstream institutions requires collateral and Section 89 of the Indian Act prevents banks from using on-reserve property as collateral.³³ Other issues affecting Indigenous women entrepreneurs include structural challenges stemming from socio-economic conditions, such as lower levels of education and employment.³⁴ There is also a lack of programs designed for women, thus the unique needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women alike are ignored.³⁵

Supporting Indigenous women's entrepreneurship is a critical step toward economic reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada issued Call to Action 92 committing to "meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining free and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples before proceeding with economic projects."³⁶ In its calls for justice, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls called on all governments to "pursue prioritization and resourcing of the measures requires to eliminate the social, economic, cultural and political marginalization of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQ+ people when developing budgets and determining government





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entrepreneurs and consultation with Indigenous women when developing supports and programming.

“eliminate jurisdictional gaps and neglect that result in the denial of services, or improperly regulated and delivered services, that address the social, economic, political and cultural marginalization of Indigenous women.”³⁷ Calls for justice are a key indicator into what systematic and social changes must be prioritized to promote and support Indigenous women.

Furthermore, Canada must commit to the support of Indigenous women entrepreneurs and consultation with Indigenous women when developing supports and programming. According to a report published in 2020 by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, “Indigenous women themselves are best equipped to understand the needs of other Indigenous women.”³⁸ Indigenous women must be consulted to understand barriers and be involved in the processes of creating programs and policies.

Organizational supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs

This section focuses on available organizational supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Organizational supports would traditionally include institutions, actors and resources such as business support organizations, networking opportunities, Indigenous and mainstream financial institutions, and educational institutions such as colleges and universities. Business support organizations like incubators and accelerators are important for entrepreneurs, offering a wide variety of services such as networking opportunities, mentorship, training and financial aid for business growth and development.

Although these support organizations aim to empower and enable Indigenous entrepreneurship, some institutions are entrenched with colonialist and patriarchal attitudes that create significant barriers for all Indigenous Peoples. There are financial, structural, cultural and institutional barriers that restrict the development and sustainability of Indigenous entrepreneurship.³⁹ A 2020 report by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health states that: “Perceptions exist among non-Indigenous lending institutions and organizations that Western models of work and entrepreneurship are superior to Indigenous models, coupled with attitudes of paternalism, racism, and stereotyping of Indigenous Peoples, can work to give a structural advantage of the dominant culture while effectively disempowering Indigenous individuals”.⁴⁰



While organizations are working toward improving the entrepreneurial landscape and dismantling barriers for Indigenous entrepreneurs, it is critical to listen to Indigenous women to understand what they need to overcome barriers and have successful endeavours.

Available supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs

Indigenous women entrepreneurs need additional accessible resources and supports due to the existing barriers related to accessing financing, information and basic infrastructure. To assist in addressing and dismantling these barriers, there are business support organizations available for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. For example, #BeTheDrum is an entrepreneurial outreach and navigation program developed by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), while the Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Accelerator program offers workshops and resources on a range

of topics including strategy, marketing, finance, human resources, equipment, networking and procurement. It is critical that supports are designed, developed, and implemented in consultation with Indigenous entrepreneurs and Elders to ensure that programs and policies reflect the values and achieve the outcomes of success as defined by Indigenous women entrepreneurs themselves.

Receiving funding is the most significant barrier for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, although this can be partially overcome through access to business support organizations. Indigenous women entrepreneurs' struggles are compounded by systemic racism and geographic isolation, which hinder eligibility for funding. There is some progress being made on access to funding though. Financial institutions like the Big Five Canadian banks have improved efforts and begun working with Indigenous communities to advance economic

reconciliation and Indigenous prosperity in Canada. There are also 58 IFIs in Canada that provide developmental lending, business financing, and support services to First Nations, Métis and Inuit businesses in all provinces and territories. Lastly, there has been growing policy and financial support to help close the gap between credit unions and Indigenous communities.

Additionally, educational institutions have developed entrepreneurial programs and courses for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. For example, in 2021, the Women Entrepreneurship Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University launched the first cohort of their Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program. Likewise, Queen's University has partnered with Okwaho Equal Source on a project called Kwe-Biz, which has provided Indigenous-led online and in-person business training and mentorship for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

In this section, we will review the role that these actors and institutions play in supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Additionally, we will provide an overview of existing programs and organizations dedicated to supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada.

Business support organizations

Business support organizations are essential for entrepreneurs. These organizations offer a range of services that provide entrepreneurs with knowledge and resources, such as networking opportunities, mentorship, training, and financial support for business growth and development.

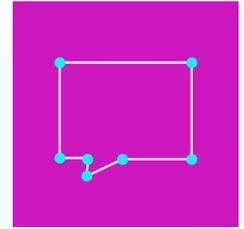
In Canada, there is a wide variety of business support organizations that target different areas of business development. Examples include incubators, accelerators, small business centres, investment networks and associations, post-secondary institutions, economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, social enterprise organizations, and supplier diversity organizations, as well as grassroots, feminist and community initiatives.⁴¹ In particular, incubators help entrepreneurs scale up and develop their businesses in the early stages. They offer coaching and mentorship to help entrepreneurs gain the information they need to develop their businesses.⁴²

Services like coaching and funding are especially useful for women and other entrepreneurs from equity-deserving groups, who need strong support systems as a result of the barriers they face. However, incubators and accelerators often do not meet the unique needs of women and other diverse entrepreneurs.⁴³ To address this issue, there are organizations throughout Canada that are specifically designed for women entrepreneurs. Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC) works with a diverse membership of organizations that support women entrepreneurs. Through their national network of loan fund partners, WEOC delivers their National Loan Program,

which provides financing to women entrepreneurs as they start and scale their businesses.⁴⁴ The Forum is a national charity that provides women entrepreneurs with financial support and social capital through impactful community, education and mentorship programs.⁴⁵ Startup is a women's community incubator that provides an ecosystem by and for women entrepreneurs.⁴⁶ Total Mom is a community and professional networking platform that offers business programs, wellness experiences, coaching and mentorship to mother entrepreneurs.⁴⁷ Another example is The Finance Cafe, a financial literacy learning platform that addresses gender gaps and meets the unique needs of women entrepreneurs.

There is little research on business support organizations that are designed for business owners from equity-deserving groups.⁴⁸ ⁴⁹ Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we have compiled a list of business support organizations that specifically target the needs of Indigenous businesses and Indigenous women-owned businesses (See Appendix Table 1). The services offered by these organizations identify and address the challenges faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs, who struggle to access financing, information and basic infrastructure.⁵⁰

Funding is the main barrier for women entrepreneurs. According to a 2020-2021 survey conducted by WEOC, 20% of women entrepreneurs identified access to capital as a challenge that hindered business growth.⁵¹ Meanwhile, 40% expressed that they could use more financial support from the government or alternative ways of accessing funding.⁵²



According to a 2020-2021 survey conducted by WEOC, **20% of women entrepreneurs identified access to capital as a challenge that hindered business growth.** 40%

expressed that they could use more financial support from the government or alternative ways of accessing funding.

Indigenous women face additional challenges regarding a lack of access to capital for growing their businesses and hiring more employees. The CCIB survey about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous women entrepreneurs found that nearly one-half of Indigenous women who participated in the survey found financial requirements to be a barrier when trying to access government financial support.⁵³ These challenges primarily occur due to geographical distance from financial services, systemic racism and gender bias.⁵⁴

Business growth and success depends on capital. Funding allows entrepreneurs to invest in activities like hiring talent and building infrastructure.⁵⁵ In the case of Indigenous entrepreneurs, capital allows them to expand beyond their local communities, which is typically the focus of Indigenous business development.⁵⁶ Funding includes access to grants and loans, among other instruments. It is important to note that many of the organizations offering grants or loans require that applicants



For this study, we identified **14 programs that provide support for Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada.**

Of the 14 programs listed, seven have a national scope and seven operate at the local level in provinces like Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia.

operate a business within a certain district or region, operate within a certain sector, or have a solidified business plan to guide operations. Therefore, access to funding can be considered fragmented across the province. In Canada, there are a limited amount of small business grants and prizes that are offered to women entrepreneurs by government and non-profit organizations and private organizations.⁵⁷ Examples include Startup Canada, which partnered with Evolocity Financial Group in 2018 to provide microgrants to women entrepreneurs and women-led companies in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).⁵⁸ The CCIB also offers grants of up to \$5,000, awarded on an application basis, through the Dow Indigenous Economy Fund.⁵⁹ Expanded and additional grants would be of benefit for the support of Indigenous women entrepreneurs and could mitigate challenges faced in accessing credit or loans.

Mentorship opportunities are also important to explore as many Indigenous women entrepreneurs identify a lack of mentorship as one of their top entrepreneurial challenges.⁶⁰ Mentorship activities ranged from “traditional mentor-mentee arrangements” to dedicating existing resources toward amplifying the importance of mentorship within networks.

For this study, we identified 14 programs that provide support for Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada (See Table 1 in the Appendix). Of the 14 programs listed, seven have a national scope and seven operate at the local level in provinces like Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia. They offer a wide range of services to support

Indigenous women entrepreneurs, such as holding networking events, and providing loans, training programs and mentorship services.

The NACCA Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship initiative launched across 32 Indigenous financial institutions in 2022. This organization is also one of the administrators of the Canadian government's Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund, which is a new \$55-million microloan fund to support women entrepreneurs across the country.⁶¹ The Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship initiative provides Indigenous women entrepreneurs with access to business support officers, workshops and training, and microloans to help start or grow their businesses.⁶² Business support officers can help develop business plans, apply for financing, and offer mentorship, support and other advisory services. Workshops and training help develop new business skills and provide networking opportunities for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Microloans are available for Indigenous women entrepreneurs up to a maximum of \$20,000.⁶³

#BeTheDrum is an entrepreneurial outreach and navigation program developed by NWAC. The program helps Indigenous women build skills in business, management and entrepreneurship. The foundation of the program is built upon four keystones of support: one-on-one mentorship, peer support circles, workshops and networking events, and live social Q&A and check-in sessions.⁶⁴

Launched in 2023, the Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Accelerator program offers workshops and resources on a range of topics including strategy, marketing, finance, human resources, equipment, networking and procurement. The objective of the program is to provide mentorship, support and guidance to Indigenous women, 2SLGBTQ+ people in the start-up and acceleration phases of their businesses and to strengthen their economic independence and resilience.⁶⁵

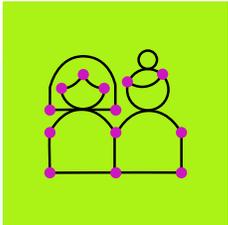
The Enterprising Indigenous Women program from PARO is designed for Indigenous women seeking to start or grow their businesses. The program provides grants to Indigenous women from remote and rural Northern Ontario, with a priority focus on those living on the remote First Nations.⁶⁶ The PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise is one of the 10 Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) regional hubs and has been instrumental in supporting WEKH's Indigenous initiatives.⁶⁷

Pestun Consulting provides business financial literacy training to Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Guided through accredited Indigenous facilitators, the learning program empowers a culture of financial wellness for Indigenous women and ignites an appreciation for financial literacy through an Indigenous lens along with a strength-based and trauma-informed approach to financial teaching. The objective of the program is to build confidence and capability in financial decision making. The program has been delivered through organizations such as EntrepreNorth, Clarence Campeau Development Fund, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), NACCA and dāna Nāye Ventures.⁶⁸

The Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, founded in 1984, has created the Inuit Women in Business Network to connect Inuit women across Inuit Nunangat who either own or are interested in owning a business. This network was launched to aid and support Indigenous women entrepreneurs throughout their business ventures. They offer networking opportunities along with mentorships to any Inuk woman regardless of age, ability or type of business.⁶⁹

The Indigenous Innovation Initiative was launched in 2018 to support and grow innovative First Nation, Inuit and Métis businesses and social enterprises across Canada. The initiative provides Indigenous entrepreneurs with access to capital through donors and investors. It also helps to capacity building through knowledge and skill building, while providing networking opportunities by connecting innovators within the ecosystem. In May 2020, the Indigenous Innovation Initiative launched the Gender Equality Program to advance equality for Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ+ people. To date, 10 projects with budgets totalling \$2.5 million were selected for proof-of-concept grants.⁷⁰

The Fireweed Fellowship is the first national Indigenous entrepreneurship accelerator program in Canada. The program is a 10-month-long immersive, cohort-style fellowship program that gives participants access to pro bono professional services, mentorship, one-on-one coaching and investment readiness preparation. The program examines alternative economic models and perspectives and explores the individual and cultural value of entrepreneurship with a decolonial lens



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to advance equality for Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ+ people. To date, 10 projects with budgets totalling \$2.5 million were selected for proof-of-concept grants.

while celebrating the strength of Indigenous worldviews. The 24 fellows in Fireweed Fellowship's first cohort are Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs.^{71,72}

Wakenagun is a federally incorporated non-profit Community Futures Development Corporation that services several First Nations and communities along the western James Bay and Hudson Bay coasts in Northern Ontario. Wakenagun supports community economic development through business financing, strategic planning, counselling and advisory services.⁷³ They offer several loans including a Women in Business loan of up to \$150,000 for women who have interest in sole proprietorships, partnerships and corporations,⁷⁴ and microloans of up to \$20,000 through NACCA's Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program.⁷⁵



The Louis Riel Capital Corporation launched its Métis Women Entrepreneurship Program to provide commercial financing to Métis women in Manitoba. This program offers up to \$50,000 in financial assistance, which includes a grant and loan for developing businesses and start-ups.⁷⁶

Kwe-Biz, a partnership between Okwaho Equal Source and Queen's University, was a program tailored to supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs through various business workshops and mentorship programs. The Kwe-Biz business accelerator program focused on business development, from the basics to advanced topics. Furthermore, their business workshops provided opportunities to network, learn new business skills and work toward Indigenous women's business goals. To further aid Indigenous women entrepreneurs, there was also the option to apply for a business mentor.⁷⁷

The Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund launched their Women in Business Program to provide Indigenous women entrepreneurs with workshops designed to network, develop new business skills and support business strategies at every stage. The educational workshops provided are designated to start-ups as well as existing businesses. Additionally, the Women in Business Program can provide microfinancing for part-time or home-based Indigenous women-led businesses for up to \$20,000 combined of loans and grants.⁷⁸

The Indigenous Women's Business Network (IWBN) was created to provide support and resources for Indigenous women-identifying entrepreneurs. Through their network, they offer three pillars of support. The first is network and community which allows connection between Indigenous women entrepreneurs. The second is resources and knowledge. Through this pillar, IWBN sorts through resources to find legitimate

and helpful resources to help better support Indigenous women. The final pillar, emphasizing recognition, was implemented to give credit to and celebrate Indigenous women who have recently launched or currently operate their businesses.⁷⁹ They support Inuit entrepreneurs at all stages of business development, find mentors, access resources, and gain encouragement from a supportive community. The IWBN was created by Inuit women entrepreneurs for Inuit women entrepreneurs and all Inuit women are welcome regardless of age, ability, type of business, or location in Canada.⁸⁰

Pow Wow Pitch is a grassroots community by and for Indigenous entrepreneurs to support their collective impact and success. Their vision is for every Indigenous entrepreneur to feel supported by a community as they act on their ideas and build businesses rooted in Indigenous culture. Pow Wow Pitch provides platforms, programs and resources that are rooted in community leadership through volunteerism as a reflection of respect and reciprocity.⁸¹ In 2022, Pow Wow Pitch provided more than \$300,000 in grants and prizes to emerging Indigenous entrepreneurs, along with more than 1,000 hours of mentorship and more than 1,000 hours of training. The community also provides a platform for Indigenous entrepreneurs to partner with each other and global brands, while gaining mainstream exposure.⁸²

The Canadian Council for Indigenous Business offers supports and microfinancing. This is specific for Indigenous women-owned businesses that have encountered systemic barriers

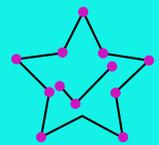
to lending relationships and financial institutions. To access the fund businesses must apply through CCIB's Tools for Indigenous Business program. Loans are available in amounts up to \$4,000 and are repayable within 36 months with 0% interest.⁸³

Financial institutions

Mainstream financial institutions

For the purposes of this section, we will focus on Canada's Big Five national chartered banks: TD Canada Trust (TD), Bank of Nova Scotia (Scotiabank), Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) and Bank of Montreal (BMO). The traditional role of a bank is to act as an intermediary between depositors and borrowers.⁸⁴ However, in recent years the Big Five banks have been working with Indigenous communities to advance economic reconciliation and Indigenous prosperity in Canada. Table 2 in the Appendix highlights Indigenous employee representation, resource groups, and community accessibility at each of the Big Five banks.

In 2022, Pow Wow Pitch provided more than \$300,000 in grants and prizes to emerging Indigenous entrepreneurs, along with more than 1,000 hours of mentorship and more than 1,000 hours of training.



Each of the Big Five banks have made significant contributions to support Indigenous employees, customers, and partners, including Indigenous women entrepreneurs. TD reports a long history working with Indigenous Peoples and communities, with milestones dating back to 1967.⁸⁵ The TD Indigenous Banking Group works closely with commercial, wealth, wholesale and retail businesses to provide solutions that meet the unique banking, financial and investment needs of Indigenous Peoples.⁸⁶ TD has also launched a financial literacy program for Indigenous

Peoples called Money Matters that held 123 workshops and reached more than 1,700 learners between April 2021 and March 2022.⁸⁷ In addition, TD's First Nations Home Loan Program provides financing to First Nations individuals to purchase, renovate or construct single-family homes on First Nations and settled lands.⁸⁸ TD was also the founding sponsor of the CCIB Indigenous Women in Leadership Award.⁸⁹

In 1971, Scotiabank became the first chartered bank in Canada to open a branch on a reserve.⁹⁰ Scotiabank's Indigenous Financial Services team offers financial products and services tailored to the needs of Indigenous nations, organizations, businesses and individuals. The team is led by Indigenous employees and includes land development experts who are experienced with major on- and off-reserve projects that involve Indigenous communities and businesses.⁹¹ Scotiabank has also created a supplier diversity program to remove barriers and increase access to procurement opportunities for diverse suppliers, including Indigenous Peoples. They are also a corporate member of all five Canadian supplier diversity councils, including the Canadian Aboriginal and Minority Supplier Council (CAMSC) and NACCA.⁹² In addition, Scotiabank was the Silver Fox sponsor for the Joint Economic Development Initiative Women in Business plenary, an event focused on connecting Indigenous women entrepreneurs with service providers. Scotiabank was also a Gold Sponsor of the New Relationship Trust Young Entrepreneurs Symposium, an event that brought young Indigenous entrepreneurs together with role models and business leaders.⁹³



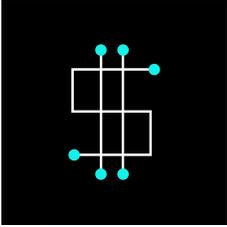
At CIBC, the bank has a specialized Indigenous Markets team to serve the needs of Indigenous nations, trusts, businesses and individuals.⁹⁴ In addition, CIBC works with Indigenous leadership to provide lending solutions to address the housing shortage in Indigenous communities across Canada. One such initiative is the Indigenous Housing Loan Program, aimed at supporting home buying on reserves and providing lending solutions for home purchases and construction financing.⁹⁵ The bank has also finalized their Indigenous Strategy for Retail and Business Banking, which will include initiatives to support Indigenous entrepreneurship.⁹⁶ It was also a founding contributor to the Indigenous Women Entrepreneur Fund, a microfinance program open to Indigenous women-owned businesses that may lack access to conventional financing.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, RBC has created several programs and initiatives that support Indigenous Peoples. In 2022, RBC implemented the Indigenous Trust Financing Program, which enables Indigenous nations to preserve capital held in trust while borrowing against their trust assets to fund community infrastructure and economic development projects.⁹⁸ The bank also supports the Money Stories program which delivers financial literacy training and capacity building to Indigenous youth.⁹⁹ In addition, RBC is a sponsor of Pow Wow Pitch, the grassroots community mentioned earlier.¹⁰⁰

In 1992, BMO created their Indigenous banking unit,¹⁰¹ and has since been recognized multiple times by the CCIB Partnership Accreditation in Indigenous Relations (PAIR) accreditation with Gold

Level status. The bank has developed several initiatives that support Indigenous employees, customers and partners. Among these is the Indigenous Advisory Council, which informs policies and practices in education, employment and economic empowerment for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples. Partnerships for Progress, another initiative, creates more internship and career opportunities for Indigenous candidates by offering a range of virtual and remote roles and training programs.¹⁰² In addition, proceeds from the BMO Sustainability Fund are allocated to projects within green and social asset categories, including women-owned businesses and Indigenous Peoples businesses and communities. Furthermore, proceeds from the BMO Women in Business Bond are allocated to women-owned businesses including micro, small and medium enterprises.¹⁰³

Though the Big Five banks offer numerous programs and platforms to advance economic reconciliation and Indigenous prosperity in Canada, Indigenous entrepreneurs still face unique challenges and barriers when starting and growing their businesses. Perhaps the most difficult challenge to overcome stems from provisions outlined in the Indian Act. According to the Act, all reserve lands in Canada are considered Crown land.¹⁰⁴ As a result, Indigenous people living on-reserve cannot legally own the land on which they live. The Indian Act also prohibits the seizure of property held by a First Nations person or band on a reserve by anyone other than an Indigenous person, a First Nations person or a band.¹⁰⁵ In effect, this legislation means that banks cannot seize land on



While the Big Five banks have made strides to increase lending options for

Indigenous entrepreneurs, **it can still be quite difficult if not impossible for many Indigenous women entrepreneurs to secure business funding through traditional banks.**

a reserve in the event of a loan default. Furthermore, Indigenous Peoples living on-reserve cannot use their land as collateral to secure a loan, as they do not own it. Indigenous entrepreneurs living on-reserve must therefore navigate these additional barriers when attempting to secure funding for their businesses. In addition to other barriers often faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs (including geographical isolation, systemic racism, lack of access to networking contacts, and inability to work full-time due to family commitments) this legislation presents significant obstacles for their business ventures.

While the Big Five banks have made strides to increase lending options for Indigenous entrepreneurs, it can still be quite difficult if not impossible for many Indigenous women entrepreneurs to secure business funding through traditional banks. Thankfully, IFIs, which are autonomous, Indigenous-controlled, community-based financial organizations,¹⁰⁶ have filled a gap by lending to Indigenous women entrepreneurs across Canada, including those who live on-reserve and who may be unable to secure loans through traditional banks.

Indigenous financial institutions

There are three types of IFIs:

- > Aboriginal Capital Corporations (ACCs)
- > Aboriginal Community Futures Development Corporations (ACFDCs)
- > Aboriginal Developmental Lenders (ADLs).¹⁰⁷

The first type, ACCs, are business lending organizations that are owned and controlled by Indigenous Peoples. They are capitalized by the federal government to deliver financing and advisory services for Indigenous business development.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, ACFDCs are capitalized by the federal government through regional development agencies and provide local communities with a variety of services, including business development loans, technical support, training and information.¹⁰⁹ The final type, ADLs, are capitalized by the private sector or by provincial or territorial governments. They provide debt and equity capital as well as a variety of business support services (including federal, provincial and territorial programs) to status and non-status First Nations, Inuit and Métis businesses and communities.¹¹⁰

There are 58 IFIs in Canada, eight of which are in Ontario.¹¹¹ However, according to the most recent survey of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada conducted by NACCA, only four IFIs have some form of support in place specifically to serve Indigenous women.¹¹²

For more than 30 years, IFIs have tried to fill gaps in access to capital for Indigenous businesses, but the demand for loans exceeds the availability of funds.¹¹³ Since

IFIs have a 97.7% loan repayment rate,¹¹⁴ the model has been internationally recognized by the Organisation of Economic and Community Development (OECD).¹¹⁵ In addition, NACCA has identified investing in Indigenous women entrepreneurs as a strategic priority.¹¹⁶ Nationally, 22% of the businesses supported through the IFI network are led by Indigenous women and 17% of IFI loan proceeds are going to businesses led by women.¹¹⁷

These institutions are better suited than traditional Western financial institutions to meet the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs and develop programming due to their understanding of the unique challenges and barriers that Indigenous Peoples face when starting a business.¹¹⁸ For example, in 2022, NACCA launched their Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program across 32 IFIs in Canada. The program helps Indigenous women entrepreneurs access business support officers, workshops and training, and microloans to help start and grow their businesses.¹¹⁹

First Nations Bank of Canada (FNBC) and Peace Hills Trust are examples of financial institutions that are owned by First Nations. Founded in 1996 as a TD subsidiary, FNBC became fully independent in 2012.¹²⁰ Peace Hills Trust was incorporated in 1980.¹²¹ Both institutions offer personal, commercial and small business products and services.

Credit unions and Indigenous communities

Historically, there have been cultural and geographic gaps between credit unions and Indigenous communities, but growing policy and financial support is helping close them.¹²² Credit unions are in a unique position to better serve entrepreneurs and small businesses. In 2020, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business surveyed more than 11,000 small businesses on their satisfaction with their financial institutions; credit unions achieved the highest overall score and the highest scores in each evaluation area.¹²³ Because of their cooperative values and membership structure, credit unions have been seen as "natural leaders" in social finance.¹²⁴

There are more than 70 independent credit unions in Ontario.¹²⁵ However, building a credit union is challenging. For example, in 2000, the Anishinabek Nation Credit Union (ANCU) opened its doors as a credit union owned by 43 First Nations in Ontario.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, the ANCU had to close its doors 11 years later due to diminishing profits and a failure to meet the minimum capital adequacy requirements for a Class 1 credit union.¹²⁷ Having existing credit unions partner with Indigenous communities or exploring changes to requirements may be a more viable option for the future. There are many successful examples of credit unions working with Indigenous communities to improve operations and identify new lending opportunities, such as Affinity Credit Union in Saskatchewan¹²⁸, Vancity in British Columbia¹²⁹ and Assiniboine Credit Union in Manitoba.¹³⁰

Educational institutions

The number of entrepreneurship programs and courses provided by Canadian post-secondary institutions has increased significantly in recent years.¹³¹ Research has shown that entrepreneurial education increases entrepreneurial self-efficacy (an individual's belief in their ability to successfully start a company) and entrepreneurial intent (the decision an individual makes to start a business). Within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, women exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy than men due to perceived lack of support, perceived lack of confidence and fear of failure.¹³² However, entrepreneurial education is thought to have a greater impact on women's entrepreneurial self-efficacy and intent than on men.¹³³ This highlights the importance of education for women, including Indigenous women, who are considering a career in entrepreneurship.

Outside of general entrepreneurship programs and course offerings, several Ontario universities have helped develop and administer educational programs that



support Indigenous women entrepreneurs. The Women Entrepreneurship Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University launched the first cohort of their Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program in 2021. In the program, Indigenous women entrepreneurs and leaders share their experiences and provide insight on building and maintaining successful businesses. Lesson topics include business structure, social media marketing, bookkeeping, taxation, public relations and funding.¹³⁴

Kwe-Biz is a partnership between Okwaho Equal Source and Queen's University that provided Indigenous-led online and in-person training and mentorship, as previously mentioned. Programming at Kwe-Biz focused on e-business, digital marketing, sales, funding, global markets and procurement.¹³⁵ Government funding for the Kwe-Biz Program ended on March 31, 2023. However, the WE-CAN Project led by Queen's Partnerships and Innovation continues to serve Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the Kingston, Ont., area.¹³⁶

United College at the University of Waterloo recently developed the Indigenous Entrepreneurship program. It is delivered as a minor in Indigenous Entrepreneurship for students enrolled in any degree program at the University of Waterloo, and as a stand-alone diploma in Indigenous Entrepreneurship for students who have completed at least one year of post-secondary studies. Courses are taught by Indigenous instructors and supported by community members with expertise in entrepreneurship and social justice. Topics covered include joint ventures, procurement policies, Indigenous economic development corporations, and taxation.¹³⁷

Methods



This section details the methods used to conduct in-depth interviews with 16 Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Ontario who have an established business beyond the ideation stage. The goal of the interviews was to explore the participants' lived experiences about their motivations, challenges, processes and the resources used during the early stages of their business. These interviews provided the opportunity for Indigenous women to explain their experiences in their own terms; however, results should not be generalized to represent the experiences of the broader population of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada.

The research participants were recruited from two sources. First, CCIB researchers identified eligible candidates through CCIB's membership in Ontario. Second, to ensure participation from remote and on-reserve businesses, CCIB sent information on the research study to the economic development officers of First Nations in Northern Ontario for them to distribute to their members' businesses. Participants were recruited via email. Businesses registered through CCIB's Certified Indigenous Business program must have at least 51% Indigenous ownership. The study aimed to interview Indigenous women who own businesses located in Ontario that are past the start-up phase. Participants also were to be well-positioned

to discuss Indigenous self-employment and entrepreneurship. The study also aimed to include participants from each Indigenous identity group (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) and from a range of industries.

Eight of the 16 interviews were conducted in the winter and spring of 2021, four interviews were completed in spring 2023, and four in spring 2024. All interviews began with a consent process to ensure participants' comfort and that ethical research standards were met. Before data collection began in 2021, the research protocol was approved by the Research Ethics and Compliance board at the University of Manitoba (protocol #HE2021-0140). Then, an informed consent document was provided to the participants and their approval was obtained before proceeding with the interviews. Verbal consent was obtained for this project because it aligns more with Indigenous cultures and world-views, as well as the history of exploitative research and broken treaties with Indigenous Peoples. Each interview followed a predetermined interview guide, and were conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams. Qualitative interviews with open-ended questions allowed the participants to describe experiences in-depth providing rich insights, without limitations. Data collected through the interview processes was anonymized unless otherwise agreed upon.



Participants were asked about their insights into entrepreneurial training and the type of training they had accessed, the financial resources and the barriers to access these resources, mentorship, networking opportunities, and support organizations. Additional probing questions were used to gain further insight on these aspects of their entrepreneurial journey. We synthesized and analyzed the data using thematic analysis methods to create themes, summaries and key research findings. These results are presented in the following section.

Statement of limitations

Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weight of the opinions held, as would be measured in a quantitative study. While the insights gathered from the interviews with Indigenous women entrepreneurs cannot be projected to the full population of Indigenous and non-Indigenous entrepreneurs, they can be used as directional information in developing policy and communications.

The experiences of the participating groups are not representative of all Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada, but they can create meaningful generalizations based on Indigenous women's experiences with entrepreneurship in Ontario. The findings reflect a range of themes, opinions and thoughts of individuals that help paint the landscape of barriers and opportunities that exist in the current environment. The experience of one Indigenous woman entrepreneur may vary to others depending on personal histories, geographic locations and other factors.

Research Findings & Insights



The topic of Indigenous entrepreneurship is on the rise. However, minimal data exist on the characteristics and complexities of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada, as well as their barriers to funding and other supports. Existing studies on Indigenous businesses do not consider the wide variety of intersecting factors that exist for Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, research is often not conducted from an Indigenous lens that considers Indigenous culture, world-views and experiences that ultimately impact the way business is conducted. As suggested by WEKH, disaggregated data can help to better understand the challenges faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs¹³⁸, which the following findings aim to explore.

This section presents themes from the interviews with Indigenous women entrepreneurs who have successfully established their businesses past the two-year mark. They identified several factors driving their entrepreneurial motivation, including flexibility and professional independence, access to resources, giving back to the community, and contribution to reconciliation. When asked about their experiences during the early stages of their businesses, participants cited difficulties accessing resources such as training, financing, mentorship and networking. They

also noted successes such as connecting with community members, pursuing their passions and positive mentorship experiences.

Characteristics of participants

Among the 16 participants, 10 identified as First Nations, five identified as Métis and one identified as Inuit. Three of the businesses in our sample were located on a First Nations reserve, while 12 businesses were located off-reserve and one business location was reported as non-applicable. According to the standards set out by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS),¹³⁹ eight of the businesses in our sample were in professional, scientific and technical services, three were in retail trade, two were in food and accommodation services, one was in education services, one was in the administrative and support industry, and one was in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry. The businesses that participated in the interview process skewed to the service industries. This means there was underrepresentation in the primary industries (agriculture and mining), secondary industries (manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade) and other sectors (finance, utilities and management of companies).

Motivations

To understand entrepreneurship from the perspectives of Indigenous women, it is key that we identify why it is important to them and their motivations. Although each entrepreneur is unique, establishing a business is a way to reclaim and preserve Indigenous culture and gain financial freedom while supporting and connecting with communities.¹⁴⁰ Indigenous women are integrating culture and values into professional goals and business operations. As previously stated, Indigenous women are innate leaders in their communities, which is reflected in the high levels of entrepreneurship seen nationwide. Indigenous women cultivate this innate leadership and then bring it into the entrepreneurial landscape.

"Indigenous women are, and have always been, hardworking, resourceful, talented, creative, skilled and innovative"¹⁴¹

- Anishinaabe Elder Ferdinand Paibomsai

The participants shared different motivations to pursue their entrepreneurial journeys. These motivations ranged from gaining more autonomy and having flexible working hours to their desire to give back to the community. The experiences of Indigenous women in traditional employment settings have also motivated them to turn to entrepreneurship.



When participants were asked about their motivation for starting a business, several recurring themes emerged:

Flexibility

Interviewees identified a desire to create a better work-life balance through flexible working hours, to accommodate personal responsibilities such as child care. For example, service-based businesses offer greater flexibility in terms of hours, location and other operational factors. This can be optimal for Indigenous women who may have personal responsibilities such as family or community-based commitments. These entrepreneurs' autonomy to determine their own schedules provides them with the freedom to balance personal and professional responsibilities.

"I was tired of working super long hours with no respect or consideration from previous employers, so I made my own niche."

Access to resources

Businesses that require significant investment in the start-up phases, such as manufacturing or agriculture, may be difficult to establish, especially for individuals facing challenges in accessing capital and other resources. Service-oriented businesses have lower start-up costs. As such, they are more feasible for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, since most use personal savings and have experienced difficulties obtaining external financial resources.

Professional independence

Some participants stated that they no longer wished to work for others or for a company that did not align with their personal values. In turn, ownership of a business and self-employment was found to be appealing.

"I don't like working for anybody else. I only want to do things that are getting results and when working for somebody else you have to do things that are not getting results."

Expertise and personal interests

Based on passions and personal skills, some participants decided to start a business on the side, which allowed them to create and sell items that aligned with their interests. Many of these participants started small businesses and expanded them over time.

"We came across a little bit of money and it had always been a conversation like, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we opened a business' and one day we thought 'let's invest the money into a business.'"

Contributing to community

Market demand has influenced participants to start a business. Some entrepreneurs started their businesses after identifying demands within their communities or a lack of needed services. For example, one participant wanted to create self-sustainability within her community through economic development, while another wanted to provide educational services to vulnerable people. One entrepreneur created her business with the sole purpose of giving back to the community and making a social impact.

"Our whole motivation and purpose was to give back to the community. We created the company to be a social impact business."

Contribution to reconciliation

Some participants wished to contribute to reconciliation through their businesses. For example, one business aimed to dismantle internalized oppression and lateral violence for Indigenous Peoples.

"I wasn't seeing much change within the community in terms of education or jobs. By using my mother's teachings, I hope to dismantle the internalized oppression and lateral violence Indigenous Peoples experience."

Multiple motivations

Given these factors, it is crucial to recognize that Indigenous women have diverse motivations and aspirations for starting a business and achieving personal or professional goals. Transforming an idea into a business allows Indigenous women to turn passions into livelihood. They can create a business that aligns with their values, achieve career goals on their own terms, and improve their overall socio-economic wellbeing.

Training

Access to training

Training is a crucial resource in the early stages of a business because it provides necessary skills to start, manage and grow it successfully. Therefore, training must be made affordable and accessible for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Some participants noted access to training as a barrier they faced in their entrepreneurial journey. Others intentionally avoided training because they felt they already possessed the necessary knowledge, were self-starters, or wanted to create their own means of motivation. These themes demonstrate a wide variety of experiences and knowledge levels among Indigenous women entrepreneurs. For those who need it, training can empower them to become successful entrepreneurs.

When asked about what training was accessed in the early stages of business development, participants highlighted various programs and courses.

Programs and institutions mentioned include the following:

PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise

PARO is a non-profit organization that provides tools and training programs designed to support and empower women entrepreneurs in Canada. The organization aims to provide women with the necessary skills and knowledge to start and grow a successful business, offering a range of business planning, financial management, marketing, and leadership development training and resources. Participants did not mention the exact program they accessed, but PARO does offer Mooka'am Kwe BIZCamp, which is designed by and for Indigenous women to learn alongside Indigenous women entrepreneurs.¹⁴²

Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Accelerator Program

This program, delivered by NWAC, helps Indigenous women entrepreneurs who are looking to expand their startups. Workshops, mentorship and overall guidance are available. The program aims to promote economic empowerment and self-sufficiency among Indigenous women by helping them develop the skills and knowledge to succeed as entrepreneurs.¹⁴³



Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network

This national non-profit organization aims to address social inequities and fill gaps in current systems to support women entrepreneurship training.¹⁴⁴ It offers a variety of training programs for women looking to start or grow their businesses, with a focus on enterprises that seek to have a positive social or cultural impact through operations and sales. The network has several program offerings: Women-centred Innovation Learnings (WIL) helps women entrepreneurs build their networks,¹⁴⁵ Social Enterprise Ecosystem Developers (SEED) is designed to support self-employed individuals through coaching and advisory services,¹⁴⁶ and Women in Social Enterprise (WISE) is intended to support women wanting to start or grow a social enterprise through skill building, coaching and peer learning.¹⁴⁷

Training barriers

To increase access to training and other necessary resources for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, it is important to first identify and address the barriers they face during the process. When asked to discuss the existing barriers to accessing training for business growth and personal development, the participants reported the following barriers:

Unaffordable costs

A common struggle among participants was access to affordable training. It was noted that investing in training in the early stages of a business can be challenging. Training programs can often be costly, which makes them not a viable or accessible option for many entrepreneurs, especially for those who have financial challenges or limited resources.

"I think there is enough funding out there. Part of the challenge is being able to find where that funding is, especially being a female entrepreneur. I think the money is out there, it is just how to find it."

Geographic constraints

Most training occurs in major cities and there is a lack of online training. For businesses located on-reserve or in remote areas, there may not be local training providers, and travelling to access training can be challenging for entrepreneurs.

“Online options were not a thing back then when the business was established. The training I took part in was very generalized. I would have liked something more specific. Geographically, there were less opportunities, compared to Toronto.”

Lack of mentorship

Participants also cited a lack of guidance, which points to the larger lack of mentors for Indigenous women to confide in or look to for business advice. Furthermore, participants did not know where to find mentors who could meet their needs.

“Investing in training in the beginning is challenging and finding good trainers who understand your business model is tough.”

“So, to get a mentor it’s really difficult because you either have to pay, it’s hard to trust people, and then no one really wants to do it for free.”

Inadequate Indigenous-specific training

Participants identified challenges in finding training specific to the needs of Indigenous business owners, and additionally for women. Indigenous women entrepreneurs may have unique or culturally specific business models that require more specific training than non-Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

Needs for improved training

Despite the network of training resources accessed by entrepreneurs, participants identified several areas where they felt training and resources would have been helpful in the early stages of starting their business:

Business planning

Participants suggested that training on how to write a business plan or proposal, and how to develop a value proposition, would have been useful to build a strong foundation for their business. The purpose of a business plan is to set a clear path for the enterprise. Value proposition enables an entrepreneur to persuade consumers, investors and stakeholders that their company will satisfy market demands better than their competitors.

"The initial start-up phase is important for everybody to get your business set up properly so that you don't need to revisit that in the latter stages."

Financial management

Bookkeeping, financial management and business financing are areas where participants felt as though they lacked guidance and resources. They suggested a need for accessible information on managing business finances for those new to entrepreneurship.

"I think a coach to help with bookkeeping and financial management could be really helpful to me."

"I am not very good at accounting and an Indigenous person's perspective of money is very different from a non-Indigenous person's."

"My biggest challenge still is that the requirements for tax returns are so daunting, and so time-consuming, that it takes away my ability to create more art, which impedes my ability to make more money."

Public speaking and communications

The need for public speaking, discussion and communication skills was cited as an area where participants would have appreciated support. This guidance would allow participants to more effectively communicate a business's needs, showcase their offerings and network with potential customers or other businesses.

Access to reliable information

Would-be entrepreneurs may struggle with where to start in finding information and resources, whether online or in-person. Participants noted the importance of having access to reliable information about entrepreneurship with necessary sources and materials.

"The challenge isn't finding training. The challenge is understanding what training I need. I took a lot of training that I didn't need because I was told I needed it. That's something that's very common right now, telling people in the early stages that they need to have a whole bunch of training about how to run a business, and they don't. So that's the real challenge in training, is making sure that people are only getting the training they need."

"I didn't need training, I needed resources. I did not have anybody that could have guided me or given me the information that I needed."

"I'm very knowledgeable in terms of navigating the Internet and finding resources (business or entrepreneurial training) and it wasn't user-friendly or easily accessible."

Finances

Difficulties accessing financial resources

Limited sources of financing

Personal savings were the most common form of business financing used by the Indigenous women entrepreneurs interviewed. Participants felt they had to rely primarily on personal savings to fund their businesses. One participant highlighted the effort required for funding applications:

"I was hesitant to apply for funding because of the amount of work needed to get it. The effort to apply outweighed the funding provided."

Another participant stated that ineligibility for financing was a barrier:

"I used self-employment benefits. I was not eligible for anything else that I knew of."

One participant noted that some low-interest loans had restrictions on spending that were inflexible:

"Yeah, way too many conditions and rules and we kind of thought 'No, that's just not going to work for us.' So might as well just go to a regular bank and pay the extra interest if we really needed to."



Barriers to financing

Indigenous women entrepreneurs often face unique challenges to financing, and continue to face harsh restrictions in accessing financial supports due to barriers imposed through the Indian Act that are still reflected today. The barriers that Indigenous women entrepreneurs faced that prevented access to financing include:

Creditworthiness and credit issues

Indigenous women entrepreneurs face difficulties in obtaining loans due to credit worthiness and other credit-related issues. One participant mentioned that they had a lack of credit history due to being an entrepreneur throughout their career, thus causing financial institutions to deem them an unworthy lender.

"I did not have the financial resources to go to the bank and adequately apply for assistance with funding my business."

"Credit worthiness as an entrepreneur, being an entrepreneur or self-employed meant you did not have financial history and so that made it very difficult to access money whether it was for business or personal use. That has been addressed more now. There is more recognition that people do make money even if they are self-employed."

"And then being a single woman. It's still very patriarchal, you know. I don't have a house to use as collateral."

Strict lending requirements

Mainstream financial institutions are perceived as strict and averse to lending for the purpose of business financing due to risks. Revenue or other collateral requirements discouraged Indigenous women in the early stages of business from wanting to use financing from banking institutions, so they turned to personal funding or savings.

"Banks are so strict. They will not lend to you unless you have revenue so I had to use personal credit cards for a while."

"We looked into getting a loan that required us to have a business plan. We thought, 'Awesome, this is an opportunity for us to get a business plan.' But we had to use a specific person to prepare our business plan and I think it was like \$3,000 or \$4,000."

High interest rates

Although the use of Indigenous financial institutions (IFIs) for financing can be beneficial to Indigenous entrepreneurs for several reasons, including tailored services and increased eligibility, participants felt averse to using them. They felt IFIs had higher interest rates compared to traditional financial institutions.

Income tax exemption limitations

Tax exemptions for the income of Indigenous women who are self-employed and are located on-reserve can impact access to business financing or loans. A participant noted that due to her business being situated on-reserve, a percentage of the income generated by her business was tax-exempt, which restricted her from claiming some expenses. This is due to legislation outlined in Section 87 of the Indian Act, which states that the employment income of First Nations Peoples operating businesses on-reserve is exempt from income tax.¹⁴⁸ As a result, entrepreneurs living and operating businesses on-reserve and collecting tax-exempt income may have reported incomes that differ from their actual incomes. The inability to claim these expenses can create barriers in accessing financing for business purposes.

"Now I'm self-employed and the challenge of tax-exempt income is seriously impacting me. Financial institutions do not consider my tax-exempt income as real income as my business is located on-reserve."

"In 2019, 75% of my business was tax-exempt. With businesses under First Nations governance, that means I cannot claim 75% of my expenses. I don't know if it is worth it then having the business on the reserve. I don't know what to do about that."

"Going to see Elders, making offerings, taking time to go to ceremonies, things like that replenish our well-being and is something that I consider to be vital to continue to do business. We in our communities might think of those as legitimate business expenses but the CRA (Canada Revenue Agency) does not."

Other issues with funding

Some participants applied for business financing and were declined due for various reasons. One participant noted being ineligible for business start-up financing and being declined due to having separate full-time employment. Another participant recalled being denied for financing due to previously having accessed funding, which disallowed them from accessing further financial support. In a final case, a participant who is a '60s Scoop survivor faced out-of-province displacement. Although she is a First Nations person, she was denied financing in Ontario due to her First Nation being located in a different province.

"I am 60's Scoop. My First Nation is in Saskatchewan and I am in Ontario through no fault of my own, but I am unable to access any funding sources or supports in my hometown because I am not in an Ontario-based First Nation."

"I'm First Nations. I own a business. I promote Indigenous business, people and partnerships. Whether or not my First Nation is in Ontario shouldn't make a difference in accessing funding. That has been a major barrier for me ever since I started."

"Because I had a full-time job, that's the reason why I was denied funding through business grants."

"It feels like there's a lot more freedom for on-reserve folks for filing taxes which I wish was extended to Indigenous people that were off-reserve too."

Financial enablers

As previously noted, Indigenous women who are looking to start a business and require financing face unique difficulties that other non-Indigenous business owners do not. The experiences mentioned by this study's participants suggest that Indigenous women are having such a difficult time accessing financing that, rather than turning to financial institutions, they are using personal savings as the only means of starting a business. Although the use of personal savings to launch a business demonstrates resilience and determination, entrepreneurs should have the option of seeking financial assistance. Using savings may not be a viable option for all. Removing these obstacles can help to improve access for business initiatives that require financing, which will encourage entrepreneurship among Indigenous women.

To understand what supports are necessary for overcoming barriers to financial matters, we asked participants what would have been helpful to access funding in the early stages of their business. Some participants had difficulties identifying what would have been helpful, which suggests a lack of knowledge of what available resources exist. Knowing what supports are available for an entrepreneur is critical in the early stages of business. One participant stated that any type of funding or financial support would have been beneficial. As for others who were able to pinpoint what they needed, examples included:

Financial literacy training

With a lack of knowledge of the financial market or knowledge of existing resources, participants may have felt discouraged from accessing financing for their business. Training to improve financial knowledge and literacy would increase familiarity with financing options that are available to entrepreneurs.

"Financial knowledge and information has to be Indigenous geared and not just geared to the general population."

Non-repayable grants

A grant can be used to start or run a business without the worry of accumulated interest or generating revenue to pay off a loan in an allotted time. A participant noted that most Indigenous businesses need support in “catching up,” which can be done using grants.

Web development and social media funding

Websites and social media platforms can allow entrepreneurs to expand their market reach, bring in more customers and generate further revenue. However, as mentioned by participants, funding to create and develop a web presence would have been useful in the early stages.

“I did apply for some funding through a college IT and web design program and then the government cut all of that funding. It would have been really valuable to (go) through the program and have the website and the technology set up.”

“I was able to access business funding through the Métis Voyageur Development Fund, which has helped me so much. I just launched my new website and I’ve already, in the past two weeks since it launched, got three new clients just from that.”

Mentorship

Challenges

Mentorship is critical for business owners, especially Indigenous women entrepreneurs, because it allows for connections with other entrepreneurs who have had similar business start-up experiences. From the access to valuable knowledge, guidance, support and expanded market reach that mentorship offers, business can experience further growth, professional development and an increased likelihood of success. The study participants had varying opinions on their experiences with mentorship.

When discussing mentorship, it is crucial to understand the distinction between formal and informal mentors. Informal mentorship is characterized by a personal or organic relationship that develops naturally. Individuals, such as peers or friends, provide knowledge, support and guidance to the mentee. One interviewee turned to Elders within her community to identify materials and methods to produce a certain cultural product, using their traditional knowledge to leverage her business needs. Another participant had an informal business mentor relationship with her grandmother.

In contrast, formal mentorship is a relationship that is purposefully created between a mentor and a mentee. This occurs either through a program specifically designed for mentoring, through the workplace, or because the mentee actively sought out a professional connection. Formal mentoring is an organized activity where one aims to accomplish results with well-defined objectives. The participants involved in formal mentorship note that these relationships provide them with the ability to surround themselves with other like-minded Indigenous women.



Those who did not seek mentorship in the early stages of business cite a variety of reasons as to why including:

Considering mentorship unnecessary

There are several considerations as to why Indigenous women entrepreneurs consider mentorship unnecessary. One participant noted being self-reliant and not needing mentorship due to their abundance of experience, while another preferred to carry out their own research regarding other women's success rather than seek it formally.

"I've never really had anyone be a mentor along this whole path which is interesting because I hear lots of people talk about it."

"I did not need mentorship as I was already an experienced businessperson."

Lack of Indigenous women mentors

Several participants cite having a male mentor or not having a mentor at all due to a lack of Indigenous or non-Indigenous women connections within a relevant field. One participant noted that her male mentor could not relate to her experiences as a woman. From this, we can infer that Indigenous women entrepreneurs desire mentorship from those with similar lived experiences and struggle to find an Indigenous woman who can act as a mentor. Further to this point, Indigenous women entrepreneurs seem to value communities of like-minded individuals or those with the same experiences.

"I had a male mentor but he couldn't relate well to my experience as a woman. I couldn't find someone from my industry, let alone an Indigenous woman in this field."

"Entrepreneurship is not a solo sport, so I like to surround myself with other women who are doing the same thing."

Qualities of mentors

Mentors to Indigenous women entrepreneurs must possess a blend of qualities that enable them to provide effective guidance, support and inspiration. These qualities ensure that mentors can address the unique challenges experienced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs while fostering their entrepreneurial growth. Ideally, a mentor should also work in the same or a similar industry as the mentee, as this allows mentors to provide highly relevant industry-specific advice that can help mentees make informed decisions and strategically position their businesses within the market. Experienced Indigenous women entrepreneurs can also serve as mentors by sharing their knowledge of traditional practices, modern business strategies and how to blend the two successfully. Participants detailed what they view as important qualities of mentors for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

Understanding and supportiveness

Mentors of Indigenous women entrepreneurs must have varying levels of understanding. They must comprehend the mentees' objectives, character traits and obstacles they have faced in relation to the business. It was mentioned that mentors often concentrate on discussing their personal success rather than how their expertise can help the mentee. It is crucial that a mentor for these business owners concentrates on the business goals and how they help achieve them in an understanding and supportive manner.

"Understanding that women have responsibilities to their family and community, mentors are important because lots of Indigenous women business owners feel isolated and the Indigenous culture of humility is in contrast with self-promotion."

Culturally relevant perspectives

Mentors must be familiar with the mentees' culture, including any traumas or barriers they may have encountered. Many participants agree that having a mentor with similar lived experience is best, so Indigenous women entrepreneurs may seek mentorship from other Indigenous women who have business ownership experience. A participant cited feelings of isolation and sentiments of humility that are unique to Indigenous Peoples; mentorship between Indigenous women ensures that these viewpoints are understood.

"If someone was going to mentor Indigenous women, they would need to understand our culture in a way. They would need to understand generational trauma, the residential school system, and the implicit effects of that for the future generations and that we are survivors. I feel like there's definitely things that someone who is going to enter this realm would need to understand."

"Understand that women have responsibilities to their family and community, mentors are important because lots of Indigenous women business owners feel isolated."

Industry specific business experience

Mentors with industry-specific experience can offer targeted expertise that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities within a sector. Indigenous women entrepreneurs who act as mentors to other Indigenous women in the same sector can provide a dual perspective that can help mentees navigate the intersection of cultural identity and industry specific challenges, fostering a more holistic approach to entrepreneurship training.

"It's important to be mentored by someone who knows the industry."

Lack of networking opportunities

In many ways, networking can be a crucial component in the early stages of business development for entrepreneurs. First, networking events provide the opportunity for entrepreneurs to develop connections with other business owners or possible clients and customers. Networking may also allow entrepreneurs to learn from other businesses or speakers at events about various facets of business development or other helpful information that they can then apply to their own business. Finally, entrepreneurs can use networking events as a marketing opportunity to promote their brands. Networking and the use of networking events can help newly founded businesses become more visible in their markets, which will eventually result in the creation of a clientele, increased sales and sustainable revenue generation.

Indigenous women entrepreneurs cite networking as one of the most important factors throughout the life cycle of a business. Participants noted that it is critical to find customers and suppliers, as well as business mentors and peers.

“Every networking situation helped push forward the brand or helped connect to people that could help in some way.”

“It is absolutely critical to find customers and suppliers. Every business needs suppliers. It is also critical to find mentors and peers because you’ve got to have someone that you can talk about your business with.”

However, participants also mentioned they encountered barriers while attending events and conferences, as well as in networking in general. The Indigenous woman’s experience was something mentioned by participants. This refers to the unique and multifaceted challenges that only Indigenous women face in networking, attending networking events and operating a business overall. These challenges include racism, lack of safe and inclusive spaces, not being taken seriously as an entrepreneur, intergenerational trauma, and lacking confidence. It is challenging for Indigenous women to meaningfully participate in business and networking events when their previous experiences have been rooted in systemic barriers including discrimination or exclusion.

“I mean, nowadays I don’t know, but as an Indigenous person, particularly Métis with our current political climate, it’s daunting to go anywhere where somebody knows you’re an Aboriginal business, or knows you’re a Métis business, and if your political adversaries are there, it’s not fun.”



As a result of these issues, feelings of being unwelcome and uncomfortable arise for Indigenous women in networking environments. A lack of safe spaces is exacerbated by forms of discrimination by other individuals in attendance at these events. These challenges are deterring entrepreneurs from building meaningful relationships, gaining valuable insights from experienced individuals, and taking advantage of a platform where a business can gain visibility. When Indigenous women are unable to access necessary resources, a cycle of disadvantage is created. However, with inclusive and supportive networking opportunities, entrepreneurs can develop networks and ensure the business thrives in its early stages.

Networking



Challenges

Costs of networking events and conferences

Many entrepreneurs find it difficult to afford networking events, which prevents them from going to conferences that would be advantageous for developing their business. In addition to the event's actual costs, entrepreneurs located in rural areas may find it more difficult to attend events in urban areas due to travel and accommodation expenses. This can be acute in the early stages of a business, when sales and income generation have not yet peaked, but the benefits of attending these events would be many.

"There are places where you're going to meet people that can help you even more, but those places tend to cost money and that was a barrier. The main reason you'll go to a conference is for networking and that is an area where funding would be really good for women to be able to access funding to go to conferences."

JTC 2023. Photo via Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada

Lack of safe spaces for women

The importance of safe spaces for women, and current lack thereof, was mentioned by many respondents. Participants note that there are difficulties in being taken seriously as a woman and other attendees of networking events, specifically men, can be condescending, aggressive and inappropriate within conversations. This indicates that Indigenous women face harassment and discrimination in networking environments. Indigenous women note the necessity of dedicated events that provide secure and welcoming environments for women.

"White older men could be condescending and were not taking me seriously at these events. There was difficulty finding women in business to network with."

"I experienced feelings of discomfort, anxiety or low confidence. When you don't know anyone in the room, it is difficult to speak up."

"It's about that comfortable space. I'm comfortable walking into an Indigenous space that I'm familiar with that maybe I know potentially what to expect when you go there. And it's not just somebody speaking at the microphone, giving out awards. It's an environment where you're bringing in drumming or music and there's Elders there."

Feelings related to humility

Several participants noted struggling with humility and confidence, which creates an inability to network with unfamiliar individuals. A sense of humility being identified as a barrier suggests that some women may find it difficult to promote themselves or advocate for their businesses in networking situations.

"I don't necessarily look traditionally Indigenous and I feel like a lot of the networking barriers I experience are because people may not approach other people that look different. From a female perspective, at networking events I absolutely get where people kind of pass over me."

Introverted personality traits

Being introverted or shy is frequently highlighted by participants as a challenge in networking. As networking events are social in nature and creating new connections may be an intimidating task, individuals who struggle with this feel less inclined to attend or participate, thus missing out on potential business growth opportunities. Participants noted that a lack of networking skills furthers reluctance to attend networking events, as they are difficult for those who are not social.

"I think that the intergenerational trauma we carry with us is a big barrier. We should have confidence because we have the ability, we have the skill and we have the ideas. We need to be able to go out there and network with people. Having the confidence to go out there is really challenging."

"I'm a chatty person in the right environment, but in an environment where you're not comfortable, you kind of pull back a bit. And like I said, to even get there in the first place can be kind of daunting."

Improving networking

To explore the issue, participants were asked to identify the most helpful types of networking opportunities for Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the early stages of their business. By identifying these needs, resources can be created to address their needs.

Participants were divided between the benefits of in-person networking versus online networking.

Virtual networking is beneficial for several reasons including a reduction in financial barriers and intimidation, and greater ease in attendance. Participants note that although virtual networking can be beneficial, it must be done correctly. For example, it must be engaging for those involved and it must provide the opportunity for conversations between attendees, especially those within the same industry.

In-person networking provides the opportunity to leave the home environment and was noted to be easier when conversing with others. A participant stated that in-person networking is ideal because, when meeting others in real life, it's "easier to pick up on their energy." An ideal networking opportunity would be an event that showcases the success of Indigenous women and includes a discussion from a panel of Indigenous women. This would allow for the stimulation of ideas and provide the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with individuals who have similar experiences.

Participants described the helpful types of networking for Indigenous women entrepreneurs:

"The best for that would be small groups. Local groups, because they can help each other the most, and at the early stages that is the kind of help you need most. Then as you grow you want to start getting out and go further to conferences and things like that but in the early, early stages, small groups working together locally is the best way."

"I think it is just talking to other people who have gone through it, knowing that you are not alone. Just having a conversation with other people who have gone through something similar, I think is the most important thing."

"We have some really wonderful Indigenous circles of various kinds of networks, you know, not just business, but education or health or whatever it may be. And as long as you have the right people running those, those networks absolutely can be a really great space to network for sure."

Overall, Indigenous women entrepreneurs would appreciate either in-person or online networking opportunities as long as they provide a safe and inclusive space. Safe and inclusive networking spaces would recognize and celebrate the experiences of Indigenous women, which is a critical facet for those who are looking to start or grow their business. Newly established entrepreneurs require spaces and resources free from barriers and discrimination to allow for equal opportunities and equitable business.

Impact of community

Past CCIB data show that Indigenous businesses set up in local communities to fill gaps within that community.¹ The businesses strive to help communities and, in turn, the community helps the business succeed.

Participants in this study similarly noted that their motivation for establishing a business was to give back to the community or to address a gap they noticed in the community. According to their responses, it also appears that communities embrace businesses and support them through accessing the goods or services provided. Some Indigenous women entrepreneurs note being recognized by patronage or chamber of commerce awards, which furthered the support from local communities.

In their answers, participants were asked to expand upon how they define community, as community can mean different things to different people and it was crucial to understand the meaning of community to these participants.

"My community, college, business partnerships and chamber of commerce, I consider that community. I would say they were probably the most important factors in my success."

They also stated that local communities were helpful in the early stages of their business journey. The participants were asked to expand on why that was the case, to generate insights into the large role that local communities can have. The participants indicated their local communities were helpful in creating a customer base that increases revenue generation, providing feedback on how the business can refine its services to meet the needs of the community, and building a positive reputation.



i Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (2021). *COVID-19 Indigenous Business Survey - Phase II: Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs*. https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/indigenous_women_entrepreneurs_v06.pdf

"So, you the local community, the people who live in our neighbourhood who are so helpful. Within the first five minutes of opening online sales for the business, there was a sale and I was expecting it to be a friend but it wasn't, it was a neighbour. It is the people who live here who are benefitting everyone."

"My community has been a huge help. The Métis people, a lot of Métis elders, some of my mentors, really encouraged me to go forward with my art when I was starting out."

"Within our Métis community here, because we meet every month as a Council and we talk frequently, they learned that we had a business and passed the word around and their friends or their family would call us to get some work done."

Successes and challenges

The participants shared some of their positive outcomes and cited a variety of factors that have allowed them to become successful entrepreneurs. Whether it was increasing their own financial wealth, supporting their communities, or learning about and impressing themselves with what they could achieve, it was clear that these Indigenous women were strong and resilient beacons of economic prosperity.



Success

Some of the things our participants mentioned in terms of what had an overall impact on the success of business in the early stages are as follows:

Peer or mastermind groups

Growth and success were dependent on having a network of like-minded peers where they could seek guidance and support. These problem-solving mastermind groups helped entrepreneurs overcome obstacles and achieve goals.

Customers and community support

The customers and the support of their communities were identified as important factors to success. Entrepreneurs' motivation to succeed was fueled by the pride and support of others.

Passion for the business

Some entrepreneurs found success through their hard work and drive to see their businesses flourish.

Investments

Acquiring investments impacted the success of certain entrepreneurs. These investments allowed entrepreneurs to build and develop their brands.

Mentorship

Mentoring from Elders, friends and other business owners was mentioned as being impactful. These mentors provided valuable insights and support for entrepreneurs to navigate their journeys.

Purpose and vision

Having a clear sense of why a business exists, along with a vision for where it's going, has been greatly impactful for some entrepreneurs.

Adaptability

The ability to be flexible in response to market changes was mentioned as how one entrepreneur was able to create a successful business.

"The biggest positive impact on the business in the early stages was my community. They're the ones who supported me the most."

"The biggest moment was when we received an investment from an Indigenous financial institution. We could then begin to create this discernable brand that I had dreamed about that wasn't possible without their investment. Without their investment, this brand would not exist the way it does today."

"I've belonged to mastermind groups and every big thing I have ever done in my life and business has been because of a mastermind group. I would say having a group of peers has always been important to me."

"The most positive impact was just myself and hard work. I was passionate about what I was doing and I was going to do it no matter what."

Biggest challenges

While the victories of entrepreneurship can change lives – for the business owner, their staff and the broader community – it is often not an easy journey to success. The ability to overcome internal (e.g., the fear of failing) and external (e.g., securing adequate funding) barriers is an essential part of entrepreneurship and was demonstrated by the women in the respondent pool.

Some of the things that participants mentioned as their biggest challenges within their entrepreneurial journeys included:

- > Not recognizing the value of a business community and the importance of getting the first several customers
- > Learning how to push and advocate for themselves
- > Difficulty finding funding and resources for the business
- > Lack of operational knowledge
- > Internalized oppressive beliefs of Indigenous Peoples that hindered their personal potential
- > Time management as a business owner
- > Struggles with being taken seriously
- > Unpredictable economic circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’m one person and there are so many aspects to running and operating a business. I’ve learned with so many entrepreneurs, we’re figuring it out as we go and that is a challenge.”

“The biggest challenge anybody has ever had in business is themselves, myself included.”

"What women entrepreneurs need to be doing is focusing on getting those first 10 customers because that is how they are going to find out how to do business. Until you start selling to people you do not know what that is going to look like going forward."

"As a conscious human being I'm always in conflict with myself about how much of this corporate capitalist system that is not ours do I want to participate in."

"I think my biggest challenge was navigating through running a business and being a mom at home, especially when the kids were at home during COVID. It really does take away from time in your business when you're trying to be a mom and an entrepreneur at the same time."

Other needs

Participants expressed the following needs for supports related to their entrepreneurial efforts:

Creation of funding for conferences and networking events

This would allow for building of networks and exposure to other opportunities.

Expansion of financial training

Since lack of financial literacy is a barrier, Indigenous organizations should create training programs to develop and hone Indigenous women entrepreneurs' financial knowledge.

Incentives to use external financing

It was suggested that Indigenous women entrepreneurs count on their ability to create a profit from their businesses for financing rather than relying on financing from other sources.

Removal of financial barriers

Traditional banks are seen to have red tape (or rigid regulations) that prevent entrepreneurs from accessing financial support for startups. Participants noted that it is time for banks to rethink their approaches and make financing more accessible.

Support for rural and remote communities

Indigenous entrepreneurs in remote areas often have poor Internet access, which creates uneven opportunities between entrepreneurs in differing geographic areas. Supports must be available to those in remote areas to ensure equal opportunities.

Creation of safe spaces for Indigenous women

Indigenous women entrepreneurs need spaces where they can share aspirations and fears with other like-minded individuals in more traditional or even spiritual formats.

Encouragement for Indigenous women to think big

As stated by a participant, Indigenous women often see their businesses as small because they cannot visualize their potential and capabilities. These business owners need to be encouraged to think big and consider all possibilities for their business.





Discussion: The four foundational principles and the future

This research aimed to identify the gaps within financial supports, mentorship and networking to determine what is preventing Indigenous women entrepreneurs from achieving success. While understanding the barriers is crucial, we must also consider what caused these barriers.

According to past research, the barriers are a result of the absence of the four foundational principles of relationships, respect, responsibility and reciprocity. While these principles were essential to Indigenous trade prior to contact, they also served as a framework for the initial commercial treaties with the newcomers to establish a cohesive existence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. Relations were strained prior to Confederation in 1867, but with the subsequent introduction of the

Indian Act in 1876, settler populations and their governments began to neglect treaty agreements and obligations.

As a result of this new legislative precedent, Indigenous communities were stripped of sovereignty over their lands, barred from autonomy as free-thinking humans and made wards of the state. The history of colonization and assimilation of Indigenous Peoples continues to have devastating and long lasting socio-economic, physical and emotional impacts which create financial hardships and uneven development.

Over time, the history of colonization and the lack of consideration for the needs of Indigenous Peoples has affected every Indigenous person in Canada. This continues to appear within the entrepreneurial endeavours of Indigenous women. The four foundational principles and how these can be utilized must be discussed to move forward in a positive way.

Relationships

The absence and neglect of meaningful relationships between the government of Canada and Indigenous Peoples has contributed to the barriers in accessing financial resources and other support. The government of Canada acknowledges this neglectful behaviour stating, “the federal government needs to focus on making improvements to its existing relationships with Indigenous groups.”¹⁴⁹ Discriminatory systems, policies and institutions that were created due to the Indian Act aimed to restrict the prosperity and well-being of Indigenous Peoples, specifically Indigenous women. It is critical that meaningful relationships are developed between organizations, governments and Indigenous women entrepreneurs to reclaim the roles and increase their economic prosperity. This cannot be done without strong and nurturing relationships.

Respect

Respect and relationships are closely tied, as respect must be present while developing and sustaining meaningful relationships. The government of Canada has committed to renewing their relations with Indigenous Peoples, built on respect, partnership and recognition of rights.¹⁵⁰ Respect can be built from ongoing listening, learning and consultation to understand the unique cultural and gender-specific needs of Indigenous women entrepreneurs.



The absence and neglect of meaningful relationships between the government of Canada and Indigenous Peoples has contributed to the barriers in accessing financial resources and other support.

Responsibility

Programs, policies and supports were designed and implemented without consultation and consideration of the needs and challenges Indigenous women face. Governments and organizations that create and deliver programs and other supports have a responsibility to respect the rights and autonomy of Indigenous Peoples, while ensuring inclusion of those involved in decision-making processes. Fulfilling the responsibility to ensure that prosperity, as well as decision making, is shared equally between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must occur through consultation and meaningful relationships.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a principle that guides Indigenous Peoples. It is based on an understanding of social, ecological and spiritual interconnectedness that supports the vitality of communities.¹⁵¹ From colonization, Indigenous women have been socially and economically isolated, while being disconnected from culture, family and communities. An environment



that fosters trust, respect, collaboration and relationships, as well as a renewal of reciprocity, can enhance social, economic, cultural and political landscapes.

Awareness of gaps

Creating awareness of the gaps that have resulted in tremendous barriers to socio-economic prosperity for Indigenous women entrepreneurs is a step toward reconciliation. Implementing and prioritizing relationships, respect, responsibility and reciprocity is a way to restore the commitments of the original treaty principles and dismantle the barriers that have halted Indigenous women in their entrepreneurial journeys. It is time for organizations and governments to design and implement programs and supports in consultation with Indigenous women entrepreneurs to provide insights on specific needs and wants.

"Because it's a time when we need to empower women... The world is out there for them to appreciate, and they can be whoever, whatever they want to be."¹⁵²

- **Phyllis Williams**

Conclusion & Recommendations

Entrepreneurship is a journey that involves multiple complex stages, each with its own unique difficulties and opportunities. While entrepreneurship is often challenging, for Indigenous women the challenges are significantly more difficult. Economic and social environments shape the landscape for entrepreneurship, while gender and culture create the nuances in which individuals experience that landscape. As discussed throughout this report, Indigenous women entrepreneurs have distinct needs for financing, mentorship, networking and other supports that enable the growth of successful businesses. Yet this analysis affirms that Indigenous women remain resilient as they overcome these hurdles and hardships throughout their time as entrepreneurs.

This study gathered insights from interviews with 16 successful Indigenous women entrepreneurs about the early stages of their businesses. It found these owners are motivated by a range of factors in their entrepreneurship. These include a desire for independence, pursuing a passion, advancing in non-traditional ways, connecting to their culture and integrating this into business, and/or making a difference in the socio-economic outcomes of their community. These Indigenous

women most commonly used their personal savings to finance the start their businesses. Other methods included retained earnings, Indigenous Financial Institutions (IFIs), and personal loans or lines of credit. Supports are also offered by financial institutions like the Big Five banks and IFIs.

Several Ontario universities provide programs and courses specifically tailored to Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Business support organizations also offer resources such as training activities and mentorship, funding and networking opportunities. In our interviews, we found that mentorship and networking were important in the owners' business successes, since they led to marketing opportunities and connections with other owners and potential clientele. Community support and peer or mastermind groups were also found to be major factors for success.

On the other hand, Indigenous women entrepreneurs face significant barriers in the initial stages of their business startups. Some aspiring entrepreneurs don't have the operational knowledge needed to start a business, but cannot network to gain it due to their lack of confidence and a lack of safe spaces for them. Discrimination continues to pose a major obstacle for Indigenous women entrepreneurs, leading to internalized

racism and sexism that hinders the success of their businesses. Furthermore, while financing opportunities are offered through mainstream financial institutions and IFIs, issues like creditworthiness and strict lending requirements prevent Indigenous women entrepreneurs from being able to access these resources. Financing and costs are also common obstacles to many potential resources, such as training, networking events and mentorship opportunities.

This study recognizes that the future for Indigenous women entrepreneurs is full of potential and opportunities for growth. While the report examines the early stages of Indigenous women's entrepreneurship, future research on this topic needs to build upon its findings. Indigenous women's entrepreneurship continues to grow alongside the trends of sustainability and social impact, meaning that more Indigenous women-owned businesses could expand beyond their own communities and into global markets.

Having Indigenous voices lead entrepreneurship programming and education is essential for creating programs that are culturally relevant, trusted and effective. Indigenous leaders bring a deep understanding of their communities' cultural values, traditions and unique challenges. They can design entrepreneurship programs that resonate with Indigenous world-views, integrating traditional knowledge and practices into modern business education. This extends to Indigenous women as no one understands their needs better than Indigenous women themselves. Entrepreneurship programming managed by and for Indigenous women can therefore

address the unique needs of Indigenous women in a culturally appropriate way.

While the insights gathered here cannot be universally understood as the views of all Indigenous women entrepreneurs, they can provide directions in developing policy recommendations. However, the smaller sample size used within this research poses limitations, as findings may be misinterpreted as a generalization of the experiences of the broader Indigenous population. The experiences of the participants may not be representative of all Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada, due to differences in personal histories, geographic locations and other factors. The findings are meant to draw upon similar themes and thoughts of like-minded individuals to identify barriers and opportunities that exist in the current landscape.

For Indigenous women's entrepreneurship to flourish, a supportive environment is required. As it stands now, Indigenous women face hurdles and will continue to experience these until systems are unified with reciprocal features and institutions are inclusive to the unique needs of diverse groups.¹⁵³ Supports including investments, financial capital, access to financing, opportunities for growth, progressive institutions, programs created for Indigenous women specifically, and support networks are all necessary for Indigenous women's entrepreneurship.¹⁵⁴ The first essential step toward this is creating awareness of the gaps that result in the barriers outlined throughout this report. Through this, we can begin the journey toward economic reconciliation for Indigenous women.

Recommendations and wise practices

This study examined the early stages of Indigenous women-owned businesses to identify opportunities, barriers and supports available to Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Using the findings from our examination, we propose recommendations that will facilitate the further growth of Indigenous women's entrepreneurship:

- > **Policy makers, financial institutions and business support organizations must consult and collaborate** with Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the development of necessary policies and resources to support business growth. Indigenous women understand the specific and unique needs that must be reflected in programs and policies.
- > **Training and financing should be bolstered** to encourage Indigenous women to pursue entrepreneurship in industries where Indigenous women are underrepresented (i.e., non-service-based industries).
- > **Training programs that are cost-effective and accessible to all** should be developed. Whether remote or on-site, these will ensure that Indigenous women entrepreneurs in remote areas have access to the same opportunities as those in urban areas. Also, marketing or awareness campaigns should be created to promote affordable training programs.
- > **Financing options that are easily accessible** to Indigenous women should be developed and have lowered eligibility requirements for Indigenous women. In addition, it is recommended to:
 - > Encourage financial institutions, including IFIs, to create programs or funding to fit the needs of Indigenous women
 - > Expand available non-repayable grants so that Indigenous women can grow their businesses without worry of debt and interest accumulation matters
 - > Educate local financial institutions on the needs and potential of Indigenous women owned businesses
- > **Bursaries or grants** should be developed for Indigenous women to attend networking events and access opportunities that can allow for business growth.
- > **An Indigenous women's entrepreneurship network** should be created to allow members to connect through mentorship or networking in a safe and inclusive environment.



Other considerations

- > Access to safe and affordable child care should be provided. This would allow Indigenous women to continue existing business operations or pursue entrepreneurial endeavours.
- > Support should be increased for entrepreneurs in the pursuit of incorporating traditional knowledge into business.
- > A gender and diversity-based lens should be applied to future research and programs that support Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

Appendix



TABLE 1

Overview of ecosystem supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada

Organization	Program	Objective	Strategic Focus	Resources and Services	Scope	Socio-Economic Effect
National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA)	Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program	Support Indigenous women in their entrepreneurial ventures	Stimulating economic growth for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Funding > Training > Promoting Indigenous business development 	National	By conducting nationwide research, NACCA works to analyze challenges and barriers for Indigenous women entrepreneurs to further recognize support needed. In 2022, they obtained \$22 million over three years for the Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Program.
Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC)	#BeTheDrum Entrepreneur Outreach Navigation Program	Build skills of Indigenous women entering the sphere of business, management and entrepreneurship	Providing skills for Indigenous women to aid in economic development through entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Assistance in networking > Training in skills > Multiple support services 	National	NWAC hosts several conferences to improve business management and entrepreneurial skills. It also has four keystones of support for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people to increase chances of business survival. In 2021 alone, 900 Indigenous women joined their workshops.
Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC)	Indigenous Women's Entrepreneur Accelerator Program	Support the economic independence of Indigenous women	Expanding Indigenous women's start-up businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Various workshops and networking events to build skills 	National	The program aims to support economic independence and resilience of Indigenous W2STGD people. It features a variety of opportunities to gain skills such as mentorship, HR resources, technology, networking and marketing.

Organization	Program	Objective	Strategic Focus	Resources and Services	Scope	Socio-Economic Effect
PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise	Enterprising Indigenous Women	Assist Indigenous women in starting their own businesses or further developing an existing one	Supporting Indigenous women who strive to have their own businesses	> Funding	Local (remote and rural Northern Ontario)	This program is designed for Indigenous women seeking to start or develop their business. By funding their business ventures, PARO hopes to expand businesses owned by Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada	Inuit Women in Business Network	Connect Inuit women across Inuit Nunangat to support Inuit business-women	Networking Inuit women who have businesses or plan to start them	> Networking opportunities > Mentorship assistance	Local (Inuit Nunangat)	This program works to produce greater awareness of the needs of Inuit women and foster networking. This is done by encouraging their participation in community, regional and national concerns which relate to social, cultural and economic development. In 2021, around \$500,000 was used to support Inuit women's economic development.
Grand Challenges Canada	Indigenous Innovation Initiative	Enable Indigenous innovators and advance equality for Indigenous women, and 2SLGBTQ+ community	Meeting the needs of Indigenous innovators and promoting Indigenous equality	> Supporting and providing guidance > Funding > Skill building > Networking opportunities	National	Grand Challenges Canada provided \$2.5 million in funding to 10 projects belonging to Indigenous women. They also offer skill-building and networking opportunities to increase the sustainability of entrepreneurial ventures
Fireweed Fellowship	Fireweed Fellowship	Assist in educational development for Indigenous entrepreneurs	Examining alternative economic models and the individual and cultural value of entrepreneurship, and understanding Indigenous world-view through their businesses	> Funding > Training > Mentorship opportunities > 10-month training program	National	Fireweed Fellowship is the first national accelerator program for Indigenous entrepreneurship. It assists with funding planning, professional counseling, mentorship and unique business planning tools.

Organization	Program	Objective	Strategic Focus	Resources and Services	Scope	Socio-Economic Effect
Wakenagun Community Futures Development Corporation (IFI)	Wakenagun Community Futures Development Corporation (IFI)	Promoting economic development and entrepreneurial initiatives for Mushkegowuk community	To support the growth of Indigenous Peoples' entrepreneurial endeavours through support, funding and educational assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Funding > Counselling > Advisory services 	Local (Mushkegowuk community)	This IFI can provide financing up to \$150,000 to start or expand a business. Additionally, they have a variety of support services such as business financing, strategic planning and business advisory support services
Louis Riel Capital Corporation (LRCC)	Métis Women Entrepreneurship Program	Providing commercial financing to help Métis women start or expand their business	Supporting and financing Métis women through their business ventures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Funding 	Local (Manitoba)	This corporation provides commercial financing to aid Métis women starting or expanding a business in Manitoba. Their program can offer up to \$50,000 in financing.
Kwe-Biz (No longer in operation)	Supporting Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs	Aiding Indigenous women entrepreneurs through business training and mentorship	Developing educational assistance to help better support Indigenous women entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Mentorship > Business workshops > Networking opportunities > Educational training 	Local (Southern Ontario)	Kwe-Biz provided Indigenous-led online and in-person business training, mentorship, and workshops for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF)	Women in Business Program (WiB)	Providing financing, online and in-person business training	Aid educational development with the help of financing for Northern Indigenous women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Skills training > Funding > Networking > Assistance with business strategies 	Local (Northern Ontario)	This fund works to advance Indigenous Peoples through business and economic development initiatives in their Women in Business program. In 2021 to 2022, NADF supported 37 projects with around \$3 million to Indigenous entrepreneurs.
The Indigenous Women's Business Network (IWBN)		Supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs through networking, providing resources and recognition	Provide accessible resources while building a community to help Indigenous women through their business ventures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Networking and community > Providing resources > Recognition 	Local (British Columbia)	This network was created to provide support and resources, as well as recognition, to Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Organization	Program	Objective	Strategic Focus	Resources and Services	Scope	Socio-Economic Effect
Pow Wow Pitch	Pow Wow Pitch Program	Providing platforms, programs and resources to support Indigenous entrepreneurs so they can start and grow thriving and sustainable businesses rooted in Indigenous culture	Enhance, develop and accelerate growth for current and aspiring Indigenous entrepreneurs in a sustainable way through programs and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Networking > Mentorship > Programs > Funding > Access to resources 	National	In 2022, Pow Wow Pitch provided more than \$300,000 in grants and prizes to emerging Indigenous entrepreneurs, more than 1,000 hours of mentorship, and more than 1,000 hours of training.
Canadian Council for Indigenous Business	Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship Fund	Providing support through microloans to Indigenous women	Mitigate challenges that Indigenous women face when accessing financial support through traditional financial institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Funding 	National	The council offers a range of financial resources and support for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Indigenous women entrepreneurs are granted up to \$4,000 in loans that have 0% interest, payable over a 36-month period.
Pestun Consulting Inc.		Providing financial literacy training to Indigenous women entrepreneurs	Support, develop and grow Indigenous women's entrepreneurship through financial education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Skills training > Mentorship > Coaching 	National	Pestun Consulting provides training facilitation through accredited facilitators of The Finance Cafe. Facilitators are Indigenous women in finance working as educators and advocates to champion financial literacy and help accelerate Indigenous women's entrepreneurship.

TABLE 2

Indigenous workforce representation, resource groups and community accessibility in Canada's Big Five banks

Bank	Indigenous Workforce Representation (Senior Management)	Indigenous Workforce Representation (Overall)	CCIB PAIR Level	Indigenous Resource Groups	Indigenous Community Accessibility (National)
TD ¹⁵⁵	1.5%	1.0%	CCIB Gold PAIR	Indigenous Peoples Committee	4 on-reserve branches ¹⁵⁶
Scotiabank ¹⁵⁷	0.2%	1.2%	CCIB Gold PAIR	Scotiabank Aboriginal Network	4 on-reserve branches ¹⁵⁸
CIBC ¹⁵⁹	1.0%	3.0%	CCIB PAIR Committed	Indigenous Employee Circle	4 on-reserve banking centres ¹⁶⁰
RBC ¹⁶¹	Not Reported	1.3%	CCIB PAIR Committed	RBC Royal Eagles	8 on-reserve branches, 3 commercial banking centres, & 5 Royal Bank Agency Banking Outlets ¹⁶²
BMO ¹⁶³	Not Reported	1.4%	CCIB Gold PAIR	Sharing Circle	13 branches and one community banking outlet ¹⁶⁴

Information for Table 2 was collected from the chartered banks' employment equity and diversity reports and Indigenous partnership reports, if available. Partnership Accreditation in Indigenous Relations (PAIR) is a certification program that confirms corporate performance in Indigenous relations at the bronze, silver or gold level. Companies promote their level with a PAIR logo signaling to communities that they are good business partners, great places to work and committed to prosperity in Indigenous communities.

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