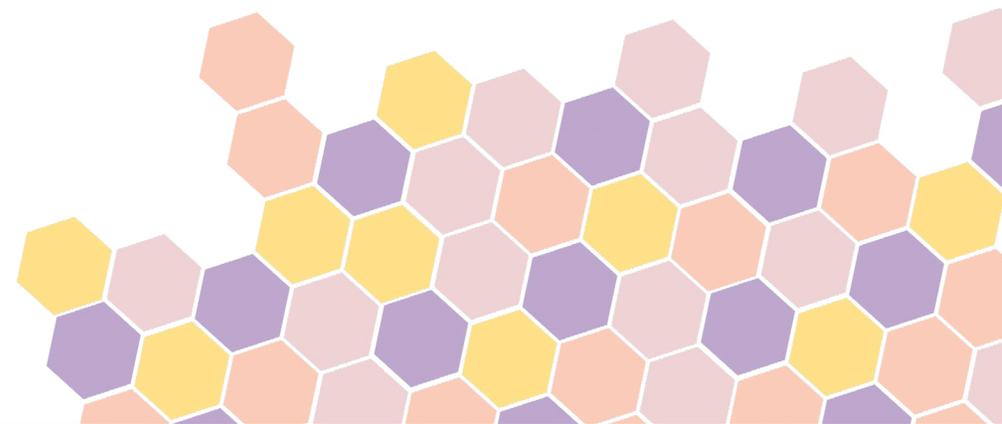# Centring Equity:

Catalyzing system change through a collaborative, cogenerating knowledge network

THE STORY OF THE WOMEN OF ONTARIO SOCIAL ENTERPRISE NETWORK (WOSEN) PART 2

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Northern Ontario Research, Development, Ideas and Knowledge

NORDIK
INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Research conducted in Canada by Cukier, Mo, Chavoushi, Borova, & Osten (2022) indicate the current entrepreneurial offerings available to women are a very traditional top down approach, a 'one size fits all', programming, tending to focus on rapid growth businesses, and sectors that are viewed to have the potential to become profitable quickly, i.e., areas of business that typically have fewer diverse women founders.

The Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN) is a province-wide collaborative composed of five social innovation and system change organizations. It is led by Pillar Nonprofit Network in partnership with Social Innovation Canada[1] (SI Canada), Social Venture Connexion (SVX), and NORDIK Institute (NORDIK) with support from Lean4Flourishing (L4F). WOSEN acknowledges the debilitating consequences of structural racism, and most recently, the disparate impact COVID-19 is having on marginalized women in particular. In response, the collaborative aims to catalyze social innovation by redesigning the entrepreneurial ecosystem to meet the needs of women[2] founders from diverse equity-seeking groups. WOSEN's focus is women who have business solutions that put people and the planet first (i.e., social enterprises). Their approach shifts the focus from current entrepreneurial supports and financing structures that are readily available and easy to deliver to models that holistically support the entrepreneur's learning journey and aspirations. This approach has helped hundreds of entrepreneurs across Ontario to start and grow their businesses and has unlocked millions of dollars in capital for these initiatives.

Centring Equity is the second of three reports documenting the Story of the Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network's collective learning journey and systems impact. Part One, *Outstanding By Standing Together*, **Interim Report** and **Summary Interim Report** (March 2021) indicate the partners' foundation of trust and dedication to collaboration and co-creation in meeting the project's objectives, processes, programming and evaluation framework was seen as an innovative, effective and an impactful approach to addressing system change. This report deepens the Interim Report's key learnings. It contextualizes the initiative within current social change practices and community development principles aiming to advance equity, providing a critical reflection on WOSEN's approach to, and resulting impact on, the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The Final Report, Part Three, shall be available toward the initiative's current scheduled sunset of March 2023.

At the outset, the collaborative committed to equity being their 'north star' and, as Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022) state, "If attaining equity and justice is our north star, we must begin with the end in mind" (p.45). WOSEN members saw this initiative as a call, a challenge, an opportunity for embarking on an individual and collective journey in learning '*what*' centring equity means and '*how to*' embody and embed it in all aspects of WOSEN (Fenech, Jaimes, Rutsch, Schoen, & Muehlenbein, 2022, p.22).

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1   The Centre for Social Innovation (CSI Toronto) was the original signatory organization. Due to CSI's restructuring, SI Canada became the partnering organization.

2   Women includes ALL women; including those who are Indigenous, in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants or refugees, 2SLGBTQ+, or those with disabilities; All programing is inclusive of Two-Spirit and non-binary/genderqueer individuals.

The collaborative's working understanding of equity (stated below), builds on the Urban Strategies Council's definition that Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022) adapted to include the consideration of representation in crucial areas of assessment (p.38). It also incorporates NORDIK Institute's grounding of respectful relationship building and the notion of agency, resilience and collective stewardship as critical areas in the work.

Equity is fairness and justice achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportunities, outcomes, and representation and redressing those disparities through targeted actions – respectful relationship building, transforming transactional relationships into meaningful ones supportive of each other's individual journey toward wellbeing, agency and resilience and collective stewardship of the planet.

The WOSEN partners invested a considerable amount of time during the launch phase establishing a shared working understanding of the scope of the project and its goals; identifying guiding principles; and, conceptualizing a framework that would integrate these threads in collaborating on and implementing this large-scale project. An innovative model has evolved from the initial work – an equity-centred, cogenerating knowledge network – transforming the partnership into a supportive capacity-building initiative for the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It integrates recognized systems change field practices and foundational community development principles and methodologies, embedding emergent collaborative and co-creative processes in creating an 'ecosystem of trust' for continually learning how to centre equity. Specifically, the collaborative's conceptual framework has woven together: i) equity-centred collective impact; ii) principles-focused developmental evaluation; and iii) social impact measurement, designing an intertwined system change assessment framework to evaluate progress at a project and program level, and guide its next steps.

WOSEN's targeted goals collectively aim to:

i. reveal the mental models, power dynamics, relationships and connections, resource flows, practices and policies that keep these social problems in place, hindering founders in achieving their entrepreneurial aspirations (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018, p.4); and,

ii. redesign the entrepreneurial ecosystem by intentionally engaging founders and ecosystem supporters in emergent collaborative and co-creative practices to understand women's contexts, and align actions to create the critical infrastructure (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows) that support the development of women-owned and women-led ventures.

To activate systems change and advance equity in entrepreneurial systems, the WOSEN collaborative intentionally developed and integrated three interconnected strategies into their work. They are:

CATALYST ONE: EMBODY AND EMBED A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION AND CO-CREATION

Ground the work in WOSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, anti-racist and decolonizing framework to build trust and capacity for embedding and embodying collaborative and co-creative processes, transforming transactional relationships into a knowledge cogenerating network.

CATALYST TWO: LINK AND LEVERAGE ECOSYSTEM RESOURCES

Adopt an ecosystem approach by placing women with lived experience at the centre of inquiry, engaging them and ecosystem supporters in actively understanding their contexts and needs, creating effective supports, and leveraging and reallocating assets to enable founders to flourish.

CATALYST THREE: GATHER MEANINGFUL DATA FOR TARGETED SOLUTIONS

Gather robust qualitative and quantitative data through a variety tools, providing an authentic and multi-perspective context for analyzing operation and program effectiveness, and embed iterative processes (i.e. observe, reflect, plan and act) to continuously respond to arising concerns and emerging innovation and evolution.

Underpinning engagement and interaction at the project and program level is their **WOSEN Design Principles**, an anti-racist, decolonizing framework. It creates space for co-leadership, incorporating diverse voices and perspectives into the co-production and delivery of entrepreneurial supports, and offers flexibility to respond to emerging needs as the programming and project unfolds.

The significant role collaboration and co-creation play in advancing equity work cannot be overstated. The study indicates WOSEN's commitment to centring women, and engaging them and ecosystem supporters (e.g., business developers, coaches, funders/investors) in emergent, collaborative and co-creative practices provides space for knowledge sharing and cogenerating innovative pathways forward to support women-owned and women-led ventures. The interaction increases understanding of diverse founders' contexts and needs, facilitating the development of critical infrastructure (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows) founders need to match their potential to flourish locally and/or globally. It simultaneously builds the entrepreneurial ecosystem's professional development, wellness, agency and resilience for centring equity.

To date, the project has engaged more than 940 participants from over 140 different rural, urban and First Nation communities across Ontario, and has assisted in unlocking $8.8 million for women founders. Founders noted programs provided an inclusive and empathetic space with multiple ways to participate in meaningful ways. It meant a great deal to be able to speak to other women with similar backgrounds and learn about ways they are launching and growing successful small businesses. Participants also suggested the programming was energizing and increased their confidence, self-motivation and ability to develop their ideas and launch their business. Some founders connected with key investors through WOSEN's programs. Ecosystem supporters (e.g., business developers, coaches, funders/investors) appreciated increasing their understanding about how colonialism, white supremacy and intergenerational trauma influence women founders, and a number of them identified ways for incorporating their learnings into their workplaces. Members of the WOSEN collaborative credit the WOSEN learning journey as incredibly enriching and transformative in the way they work with founders and communities, and in their personal lives. They cited numerous ways their ability to generate and deliver equity-centred entrepreneurship supports has increased. For example, many mentioned: committing

to embodying and embedding equity; the importance of modeling the change you want to see; the necessity of developing a foundation of trust, transparency, and an articulated shared intention when working collaboratively and co-creatively. They stated that these approaches take considerable time and effort, but it is worth the investment.

More specifically, WOSEN partners reported a significant change in their methodological approach to program design, development and evolution, indicating that their process has become more creative and emergent. It has also led to more intentionally creating authentic learning environments – immersive, experiential, safe and brave spaces[3] with attention to the amount of content provided and its timing and pacing. Additionally, they noted the incorporation of new and more diverse methods and activities to increase attunement, adaptation and responsiveness in programming, supporting the founders' entrepreneurial journey.

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3   Arao & Clemens (2013) **From Safe to brave spaces**; Aware-La **https://www.awarela.org/**. **Brave Spaces Guidelines and Communication**

Acknowledgements

The Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN) collaborative consists of the following organizations, staff and funding partners:

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1.0
Introduction

"Ashoka's core belief is that everyone can and must recognize their power as a changemaker. Since we cannot create this massive societal shift alone, we partner with influential institutions, universities, cities, companies, media organizations, publishers, and other change leaders to unlock the changemaker potential of everyone and create a world in which everyone has the skills and mindset they need to flourish."

(Fenech, Jaimes, Rutsch, Schoen, & Muehlenbein, 2022, p.14)

Social innovators and changemakers are addressing systemic issues by intentionally broadening peoples' perspectives and diligently developing innovative practices, pathways and solutions underpinning four main crises the world is facing today – the COVID-19 pandemic, global climate crisis, a crisis in deteriorating democracy, and an economic crisis that intertwines with all the others (O'Malley, 2020). These crises are increasingly negatively impacting our daily lives, heightening differences in value systems, i.e., what people value and policies, actions and priorities to mitigate them. Carney (2021) explains that there is a groundswell of changing attitudes due, in part, to the fundamental shift in our relationship to finance and economics. We are moving from a market economy where the economic sector is one of many, to a market society, where labour is no longer valued in and of itself, but valued only in context to profitability, i.e., the marketplace. A market economy perspective contributes to income inequity and precarity and hampers society's ability to address the pandemic, its financial fallout as well as the climate crisis through the continued unsustainable demands on the environment embedded in the 'business as usual' mentality.

Research conducted in Canada by Cukier, Mo, Chavoushi, Borova, & Osten (2022) indicate women in general, and women majority owned businesses in particular, have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading some to refer to the current economic state as a "she-cession". Women dominated sectors (e.g., accommodation, education service, retail) and newer and smaller operations have been more economically vulnerable, facing declining activities resulting in employee layoffs, shut downs or closures. The service sector, with a concentration of "Diverse women entrepreneurs, including Black, other racialized women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, have been among those most affected." (p. i).

Additionally, the researchers note that recent studies indicate women's mental health and wellbeing have also been severely negatively impacted. Entrepreneurs are experiencing business-related stressors in addition to the challenge of balancing responsibilities of their multiple roles (e.g., parent, partner, spouse, caregiver, friend, etc.) and increasing child care demands (p.i). Furthermore, they state the current entrepreneurial offerings available to women are a very traditional top down approach, a 'one size fits all', programming, tending to focus on rapid growth businesses and sectors that are viewed to have the potential to become profitable quickly, i.e., areas of business that typically have fewer diverse women founders.

These are complex issues requiring a systems change approach that involves "… shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place." (Kania, Kramer & Sange, 2018, pp.1-2). The Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN) acknowledges the debilitating consequences of structural racism, and most recently, the disparate impact COVID-19 is having on marginalized women in particular. WOSEN is a province-wide collaborative comprised of five social innovation and system change organizations. It is led by Pillar Nonprofit Network in partnership with Social Innovation Canada (SI Canada)[4], Social Venture Connexion (SVX), and NORDIK Institute (NORDIK) with support from Lean4Flourishing (L4F). In response, the collaborative aims to catalyze social innovation to meet the needs of women[5] founders from diverse equity-seeking groups by redesigning the entrepreneurial ecosystem, essentially, creating the critical infrastructure (i.e., the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows) for shifting value systems toward more equitable and sustainable business approaches that foster inclusive economies.

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[4]   The Centre for Social Innovation (CSI Toronto) was the original signatory organization. Due to CSI's restructuring, SI Canada became the partnering organization.

[5]   Women includes ALL women; including those who are Indigenous, in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants or refugees, 2SLGBTQ+, or those with disabilities; All programing is inclusive of Two-Spirit and non-binary/genderqueer individuals.

The collaborative's focus is women who have business solutions that put people and the planet first (i.e. social enterprises) supporting them in developing skills that match their potential to flourish, and connecting them with local and/or global communities and resources to succeed. There is a particular emphasis on operations that work toward two of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: #5 Gender Equity and #8 Decent Work and Economic Growth. Social enterprise is an approach to business (rather than a unique legal structure) that is value-based and principles-focused. Its value proposition is incorporated into its mandate and directs its operation. It seeks to have a positive social, cultural or environmental impact through its operations, and/or sale of products or services. WOSEN has adopted a broad definition of social enterprise that includes cooperatives, nonprofit and for-profit business forms.

Centring entrepreneurial women and intentionally engaging them and ecosystem supporters in emergent, collaborative and co-creative program design and the development of knowledge products provides space for knowledge cogeneration. The process builds individual and collective capacity for understanding womens' contexts and supports the development of innovative resources. WOSEN's four entrepreneurial programmatic areas of support are: Women in Social Enterprise (WISE), Women-Centred Innovation Learning (WIL); Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development (SEED); and Investment Readiness Supports (IRS). See **Appendix 1, Program Areas and Knowledge Products (p. 48)** for more information about each program area as well as the knowledge products.

The following image depicts WOSEN's goal of creating an environment where women may reach their full entrepreneurial potential through effective educational and investment supports where their specific contexts are being considered and their real needs are being met.

Current entrepreneurial ecosystem
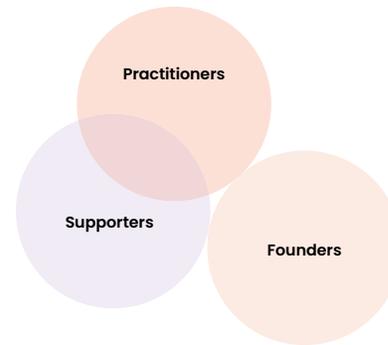
A more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem
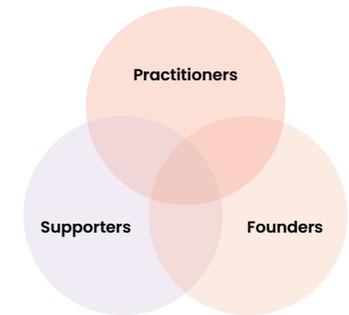
For the purposes of this report, the terminology is as follows:

i. **Founders**: women and non-binary entrepreneurs participating in WOSEN programming.

ii. **Ecosystem Supporters**: those who provide support to entrepreneurs, (e.g., business development individuals and organizations, coaches/mentors, and investors/funders) and are participating in the WOSEN program.

iii. **Practitioners**: WOSEN members, those employed by WOSEN to guide and facilitate the project's implementation including program design and delivery.

iv. **Broader Ecosystem Animators**: an umbrella term that collectively refers to founders and supporters beyond those engaged in the WOSEN initiative.

1.1 The purpose of the report

The Story of WOSEN, the collective's learning journey and systems impact, is being documented and shared through three reports: *Outstanding By Standing Together* (**Interim Report** and **Summary Interim Report**, Part One, March 2021); this report, *Centring Equity* (Part Two, November 2022); and the Final Report (Part Three), which shall be available after the initiative's current scheduled sunset of March 2023. The first report, *Outstanding By Standing Together*, indicates the collaborative's foundation of trust and dedication to collaboration and co-creation in meeting the project's objectives, processes, programming and evaluation framework was seen as an innovative, effective and an impactful approach to addressing system change. It highlights participant and practitioner learning and impact from the project's launch to mid-way through its three-and-a-half-year initiative (2019-2023) culminating in the identification of four key social innovation and evolution learnings that has shaped the future of the program, and may prove critical to the reorganization of the current entrepreneurial system to foster the growth of women-owned and women-led ventures with a positive social and environmental impact. The four key learnings are:

1. Establish a collaborative founded on trust and dedicated to collaboration and co-creation in addressing system change;

2. Ground the work in WOSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, anti-racist and decolonizing framework;

3. Adopt a developmental evaluation approach to support ongoing reflection and assessment informing co-creative and responsive design;

4. Reduce the amount of facilitator delivered content, creating opportunities for more discussion, dialogue and relationship building between participants and tailor content to meet smaller group or more individualized needs.

Centring Equity deepens understanding around the Interim Report's key learnings, providing a critical reflection on WOSEN's approach to, and resulting impact on, the entrepreneurial ecosystem within current social change practices aiming to advance equity. It reveals many ways intentional engagement of diverse entrepreneurial women and ecosystem supporters in equity-centred, collaborative and co-creation processes increases understanding of founders' needs and generates individual and collective knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and networks to develop supportive infrastructure, enabling them to flourish.

WOSEN intends the report to be considered a case study revealing '*what*' centring equity means and '*how to*' embody and embed it within initiatives (Fenech et al., 2022, p.22). It provides the collaborative with a document contextualizing their successes, challenges and next steps. Sharing the document with changemakers and a variety of audiences is intended to generate dialogue regarding ways to instill a culture that sparks individual and collective adoption of, and adaptation to, equitable practices.

1.2 Equity focused questions

The impact of WOSEN's work is framed within the following four equity focused questions.

1. How is the WOSEN collaborative centring equity?

2. How is centring equity building capacity in the women entrepreneurial ecosystem?

3. What is the collaborative learning about working intentionally to centre equity?

4. How can WOSEN share its experience and resources to continue supporting centring equity within the entrepreneurial ecosystem? What spheres has WOSEN influenced and how?

2.0
Designing An Equity-Centred, Cogenerating Knowledge Network

At the outset the collaborative committed to equity being their 'north star' and, as Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022) state, "If attaining equity and justice is our north star, we must begin with the end in mind" (p.45). WOSEN members saw this initiative as a call, a challenge, an opportunity for embarking on an individual and collective journey in learning '*what*' centring equity means and '*how to*' embody and embed it in all aspects of WOSEN (Fenech, et al., 2022, p.22).

Each of the WOSEN partners have considerable experience working with multiple partners, with many resulting in strong working relationships. In a few instances, however, partners expressed varying degrees of satisfaction for an array of reasons. These included limited opportunity for input, not being on the same page and differing priorities. There was consensus that as a collective they wanted to do things differently. They did not simply want to partner to deliver educational programming, but rather, they wanted to work collaboratively, to model the systems change they wanted to see, i.e., the valuing of women's lived experiences, stories and business aspirations for their contributions to broader society rather than it being limited to profitability (Carney, 2021).

"Centering equity shifts transactional relationships to knowledge generating ones."

(WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb., 2022)

The story begins with outlining the context for the creation of WOSEN's equity-centred theoretical framework and identifying the integrated field practices and community development approaches and principles underpinning its operations, program methodology and systems change assessment. Reflective practice provides the linkages between the elements as well as the space for building respectful relationships, transforming the initiative into a cogenerating knowledge network.

The collaborative intentionally focuses on creating deeper partnership relationships through instilling a working culture supportive of continuous action learning, learning by doing, to facilitate attuning and adapting to a more equitable lens. Their approach to engagement within the collective and with diverse founders and ecosystem supporters seeks to:

i. foster trust, safe and brave spaces[6], providing foundational support for individual and collective learning journeys by sharing ideas, knowledge and perspectives and, surfacing difficult conversations to increase understanding of one's orthodoxies, positionality and intersectionality in serving marginalized women founders; and,

ii. create a dynamic, innovative action learning environment for operational and programmatic design and implementation.

In sum, they collectively intend to build professional development capacity and capabilities, wellness, agency and resilience for centring equity.

WOSEN's working understanding of equity (stated below) builds on the Urban Strategies Council's definition that Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022) adapted to include the consideration of representation in crucial areas of assessment. It also incorporates NORDIK Institute's grounding of respectful relationship building and the notion of agency, resilience and collective stewardship as critical areas in the work.

Equity is fairness and justice achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportunities, outcomes, and representation and redressing those disparities through targeted actions - respectful relationship building, transforming transactional relationships into meaningful ones supportive of each other's individual journey toward wellbeing, agency and resilience and collective stewardship of the planet.

During the project launch phase WOSEN members invested a considerable amount of time establishing a shared working understanding of the scope of the project and its goals; identifying guiding principles; and conceptualizing a framework that would integrate these threads in collaborating on and implementing this large-scale project. An innovative model has evolved from the initial work – an equity-centred, cogenerating knowledge network – transforming the partnership into a supportive capacity-building initiative for the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It integrates recognized systems change field practices and foundational community development principles and methodologies. It embeds emergent collaborative and co-creative processes in creating an 'ecosystem of trust' for continually learning how to centre equity.

Specifically, the collaborative's model has woven together interconnected field practices of: i) equity-centred collective impact; ii) principles-focused developmental evaluation; and iii) social impact measurement, designing an intertwined system change assessment framework to evaluate progress at a project and program level, and guide its next steps.

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6   Arao & Clemens (2013). **From Safe to brave spaces**; Aware-La (2013). **https://www.awarela.org**. **Brave Spaces Guidelines and Communication**

Figure 1: WOSEN: An Equity-Centred, Cogenerating Knowledge Network

Equity Centred Collective Impact
Principles-Focused Developmental Evaluation

Project

Knowledge

Behaviours

Attitudes

Relationships and Networks

Program

observe
reflect
plan
act

Collaboration and Co-Creation
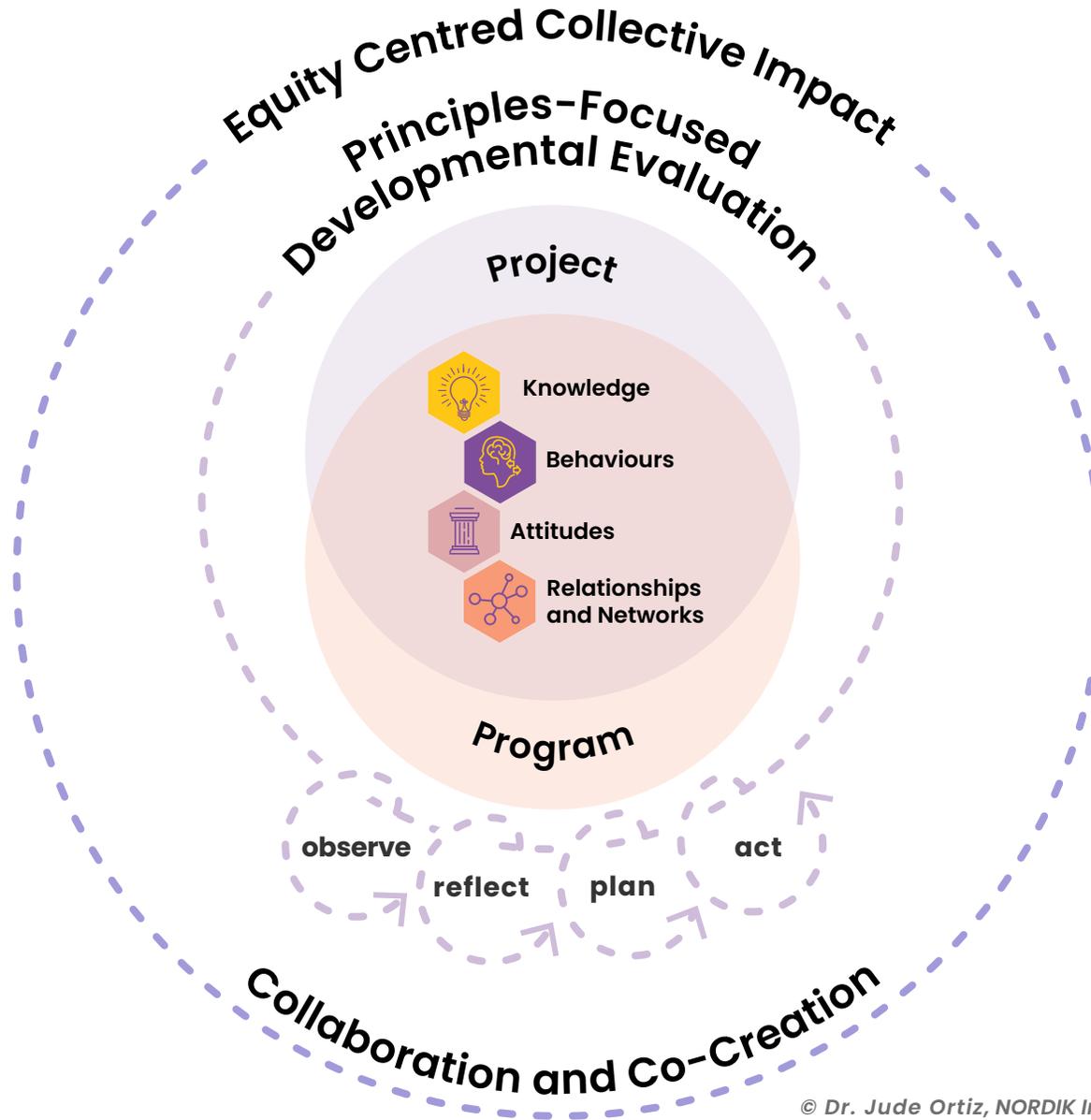
© Dr. Jude Ortiz, NORDIK Institute (2022)

2.1 Equity Centred Collective Impact

"Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change."

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"Centring equity alters the way practitioners implement collective Impact."

(Kania et al., 2022, p.40)

The WOSEN collaborative is a sector-focused collective impact model targeting the women's entrepreneurial ecosystem. While not engaging all community sectors to affect change, it is composed of five diverse organizations with a common mandate of social innovation: specifically, supporting and strengthening organizations and businesses that put people and the planet first. During the launch phase WOSEN established the five essential conditions that distinguish CI initiatives from other types of collaborative projects. They are the development of: i) a common agenda; ii) shared measurement tools; iii) mutually reinforcing activities; iv) continuous communication; and, v) a backbone team dedicated to aligning and coordinating the work of the group (Kania et al., 2022, p.38).

The concept of collective impact (CI) was first popularized by John Kania and Mark Kramer's (2011) article in the **Stanford Social Innovation Review**. Over the past ten years, the collective impact model has gained recognition around the world as a proven approach for addressing complex issues through generating innovative solutions and engaging various sector and community leaders. CI initiatives acknowledge respectful engagement of community members and those with lived experience of the issue is critical to understanding the context and creating a shared action plan (Cheuy, Weaver, Attygalle, Chapeau, & Miokovic, 2022).

In revisiting the CI model Kania et al. (2022) underscore the importance of explicitly embedding equity throughout the collective impact effort to acknowledge and more deeply examine structural inequities and the root causes of outcome disparities, stating "A decade of applying the collective impact approach to address social problems has taught us that equity is central to the work" (p.38). This has resulted in revising the CI definition to:

Translating the five essential conditions of the CI framework into an active operational model, however, is very challenging, creating tensions around processes and implementation (Cheuy et al., 2022, p.3.) To address this, WOSEN has intentionally grounded their CI framework in community development (CD) principles and embedded emergent collaboration and co-creation processes to carve out space for social innovation.

The CD principles are:

    i.   Meet people where they are at;

    ii. Value people for who they are; and

    iii. Engage people in learning together, learning by doing

From a CD perspective WOSEN members are committed to understanding people's (founders, ecosystem supporters, practitioners) current contexts, knowledge, perspectives, mind models, behaviours, relationships and networks, and to engage them in a learning journey to support unpacking the various influences that drive outer actions. From a process perspective, they are intentionally utilizing collaboration and co-creation to build trust between and among participants and to support the development of new paradigm skills such as: co-leadership; co-learning; knowledge co-generation; co-creation of resources and shared evaluation, to name a few. They aim to foster individual and collective pathways forward in working with equity. This marriage provides structure for inquiry, reflection and assessment while enabling emergent processes to lead them through co-learning about systemic entrepreneurial barriers, developing a common agenda and building capacity for delivering solutions that would support women founders.

For more details regarding how WOSEN is translating CI's essential conditions into action, please see **Activating Equity (p. 18)**, identifying three strategies for catalyzing equity and illustrating ways the collective is implementing them.

2.2 Principles-Focused Developmental Evaluation

Critical is the relationship between timely assessment of actions (i.e., learnings and impact in meeting goals) and strategic decision-making processes in guiding the initiative forward.

In terms of project development, management and implementation, the Theory of Change proposes what actions will create the desired change; the Developmental Evaluation process provides real-time feedback on the actions; and, the assessment framework evaluates progress in meeting goals.

A DE approach helps an organization generate rapid learning in navigating complex, dynamic systems to support informed and timely decision-making. It instills a culture of continuous reflection and assessment by linking evaluation to strategy. Considerations underpinning the creation of WOSEN's DE questions included: What do we know? What does it mean to us and to others? How does it impact us and others? Is it important and why? and What are we going to do with this knowledge and why? The four equity focused questions are:

1. How is the WOSEN collaborative centring equity?

2. How is centring equity building capacity in the women entrepreneurial ecosystem?

3. What is the collaborative learning about working intentionally to centre equity?

4. How can WOSEN share its experience and resources to continue supporting centring equity within the entrepreneurial ecosystem? What spheres has WOSEN influenced and how?

A Milestones and Deliverables document was created at the start of the project to assist partners with the initial implementation, providing direction for program methodology, reflection on delivery, knowledge product development, dissemination and program and project summative evaluations processes. Processes are updated as the collective moves through cycles of program deliveries. A Conflict Resolution document was also prepared during the launch stage.

WOSEN's DE methodology is underpinned by iterative cycles of program and project level reflection – observation, reflection, planning and act/ implementation – sound community development principles that facilitate sense-making, incorporating emergent understanding of how to affect change, and highlighting concerns and challenges as the project unfolds. This methodology engages practitioners in continuous learning, unlearning and sense-making. Individual and group reflective practice and participatory evaluation processes foster strategic learning, connection and trust through identifying what is meaningful data, and adapting collection and assessment methods and tools, enabling the project and programs to implement new measures and actions as goals are better articulated and/or evolve.

DE is incorporated into the work through:

- Data collection (design, tools, shared platform);
- Knowledge sharing (project and program dialogues, discussion, design jams, reflective practice);
- Collaboration and co-creation (project and program levels);
- Responsive design (project and program analysis, reviews, alignment, evolution) and;
- Accountability to fundamental principles and commitment to change.

WOSEN's DE is principles-focused, considering not only '*what*' is being done (e.g., programs delivered), but '*how*' the work is being undertaken. Principle-focused approaches are based on values that are ethically grounded and meaningful: rooted in values about what matters and based on evidence about how to be effective. Rather than being prescriptive, they require judgment in application and must be interpreted and applied contextually, offering direction, informing choices at forks in the road, and allowing for opportunities to adapt to different contexts. Central questions include: What are WOSEN's principles? To what extent is the collaborative adhering to them? If adhered to, to what extent and in what ways does it lead toward desired results? (Quinn Patton & Cabaj, 2019).

The collaborative is guided by WOSEN's Design Principles, an anti-racist, decolonizing framework underpinning engagement and interaction between and among each other, founders, supporters and broader ecosystem animators, influencing shared language, planning, implementation and evaluation. It provides the '*how to*', the foundation for intentional interaction, trust and relationship building. They emerged from the Women in Social Enterprise (WISE) Accelerator Program Design Jam (January, 2020) led by L4F, hence the name Design Principles. They have evolved over time, incorporating the collaborative's learning from working with founders and have been integrated into the initiative, operationally and programmatically. The seven principles are depicted below.

Figure 2: WOSEN Design Principles

For more information please refer to **Appendix 2: WOSEN Design Principles and Application, (p. 51)**.

2.3 A Systems Change Assessment Framework

WOSEN has designed an intertwined systems change assessment framework that evaluates progress in shifting the entrepreneurial ecosystem's perspectives, practices, resources and capacity towards more equitable and just economies at the project (collaborative) and program (participant) levels.

The collective understands systems as being a complex mix of interconnected factors, conditions and actors with change occurring when relationships between and among people are transformed through intentional collaboration and co-creation, generating knowledge and sparking reflection on one's inner life and outer actions. These creative and emergent processes contribute to wellness, agency and resilience, and builds capacity for individual and collective adaptation, rewriting narratives, aligning ideas and implementing pathways forward.

WOSEN's overarching assessment framework aims to identify changes in program participants, individual collaborative members and the partnering organizations' capacity for transitioning to more equitable, inclusive and sustainable economies through evaluating changes in:
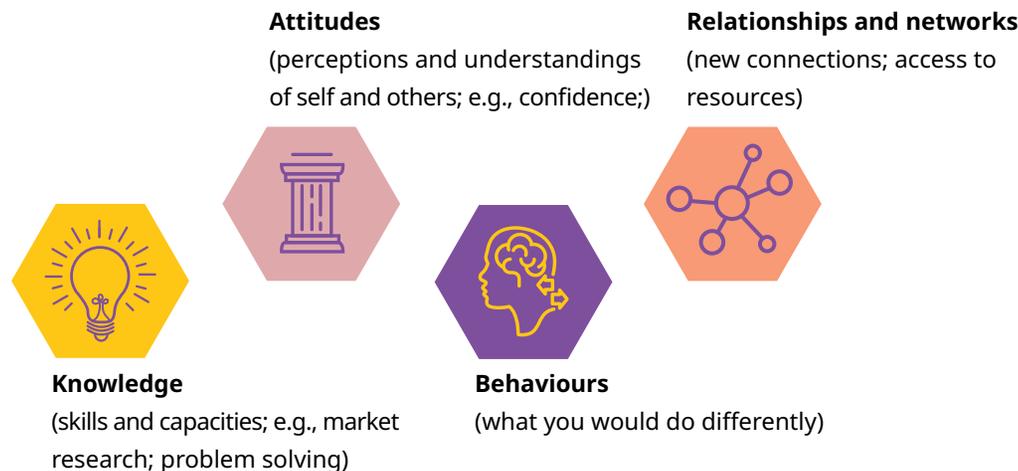
Kania, Kramer & Senge (2018) identify six conditions of systems change organized within three categories based on their visibility or tangibility. The three categories are: Transformative, Relational and Structural change. Transformational change focuses on mental models; Relational change revolves around relationships, connections and power dynamics; and Structural change directs resource flows, practices and policies (p.4). The WOSEN collaborative recognizes these three important elements and purports that evidence of change within their evaluation framework (transformation of knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and networks) influences resource flows, practices and policies that Kania et al. (2018) describe as structural change.

Analysis of the progress and effectiveness in building founder, ecosystem supporter, WOSEN's practitioner and organizational capacity for systems change is gathered through a diversity of data collection methods and feedback loops including project and program summative reviews, episodic reflections and fireside chats. The data generates a multi-perspective context to inform strategic actions, including, for example, the next delivery cycle, the development of knowledge products, and consideration of what else women entrepreneurs need and what else WOSEN can do to support them in their journey.

Attitudes
(perceptions and understandings of self and others; e.g., confidence;)

Relationships and networks
(new connections; access to resources)

Knowledge
(skills and capacities; e.g., market research; problem solving)

Behaviours
(what you would do differently)

3.0
Equity-Centred
Theory of Change

With equity firmly established as the guiding light, a working definition of equity[7] and a theoretical framework, this section first outlines the collaborative's targeted goals, followed by WOSEN's Theory of Change. It illustrates how centring women, and intentionally engaging them and ecosystem supporters in emergent processes contributes to transformational relationships and knowledge cogeneration underpinning the development of infrastructure critical to supporting founders' entrepreneurial aspirations, while collectively building wellbeing, agency and resilience for this work. The following section, **Activating Equity (p. 18)**, portrays how WOSEN's three interconnected catalyzing strategies are being implemented, operationally and programmatically.

Centring equity acknowledges, and more deeply examines, structural inequities and the root causes of outcome disparities (Kania et al., 2022). WOSEN partners understand equity as being very grounded in relational work, within each practitioner, and extending to interactions within and beyond the collaborative. Upon launching the initiative the members committed to the risk of the unknown, the uncertainty of what may arise within themself and the collective impact of such when engaging others. Rather than solely delivering programming, they are conceding to the journey of exploring '*what*' entrepreneurial ecosystem changes are needed and '*how*' they could collectively support adaptive capacity, to move from one perspective or mental model to another, toward equity-centred attitudes and behaviours.

For WOSEN, it means placing entrepreneurial women at the centre of the conversation and engaging them and ecosystem supporters in understanding their contexts and needs, and co-creating effective programs and resources that would serve them. Their approach shifts the focus from current entrepreneurial supports and financial structures that are readily available and easy to deliver to models that holistically support the entrepreneur's learning journey and aspirations. To surface current entrepreneurial system blockages and create innovative pathways forward, the collective identified two main questions:

1. What do women founders need to participate and prosper in business and society?

2. How can the collaborative support them?

Nested inquiry includes: What infrastructure needs to be developed? What knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relationships, networks and resources are needed to make this happen? Who does the WOSEN collaborative need to engage to activate this work?

WOSEN's targeted goals collectively aim to:

i. reveal the mental models, power dynamics, relationships and networks, resource flows, practices and policies that keep these social problems in place, hindering founders achieving their entrepreneurial aspirations (Kania et al., 2018, p.4); and,

ii. redesign the entrepreneurial ecosystem by intentionally engaging founders and ecosystem supporters in emergent collaborative and co-creative practices to understand women's contexts, and align actions to create the critical infrastructure (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows) that support the development of women-owned and women-led ventures.

These underpinning questions and goals informed the development of WOSEN's Equity-Centred Theory of Change.

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7   Equity is fairness and justice achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportunities, outcomes, and representation and redressing those disparities through targeted actions - respectful relationship building, transforming transactional relationships into meaningful ones supportive of each other's individual journey toward wellbeing, agency and resilience and collective stewardship of the planet.

Figure 3: Equity-Centred Theory of Change

The figure portrays the interconnected and interdependent relationships between:

- Centring women and non-binary founders;
- Active participation in emergent processes, i.e., collaboration and co-creation;
- Transformative relationships;
- Knowledge cogeneration;
- Meaningful data;
- Analysis and reflective practices;
- Strategic actions;
- Professional development, and,
- Wellness, agency and resilience.
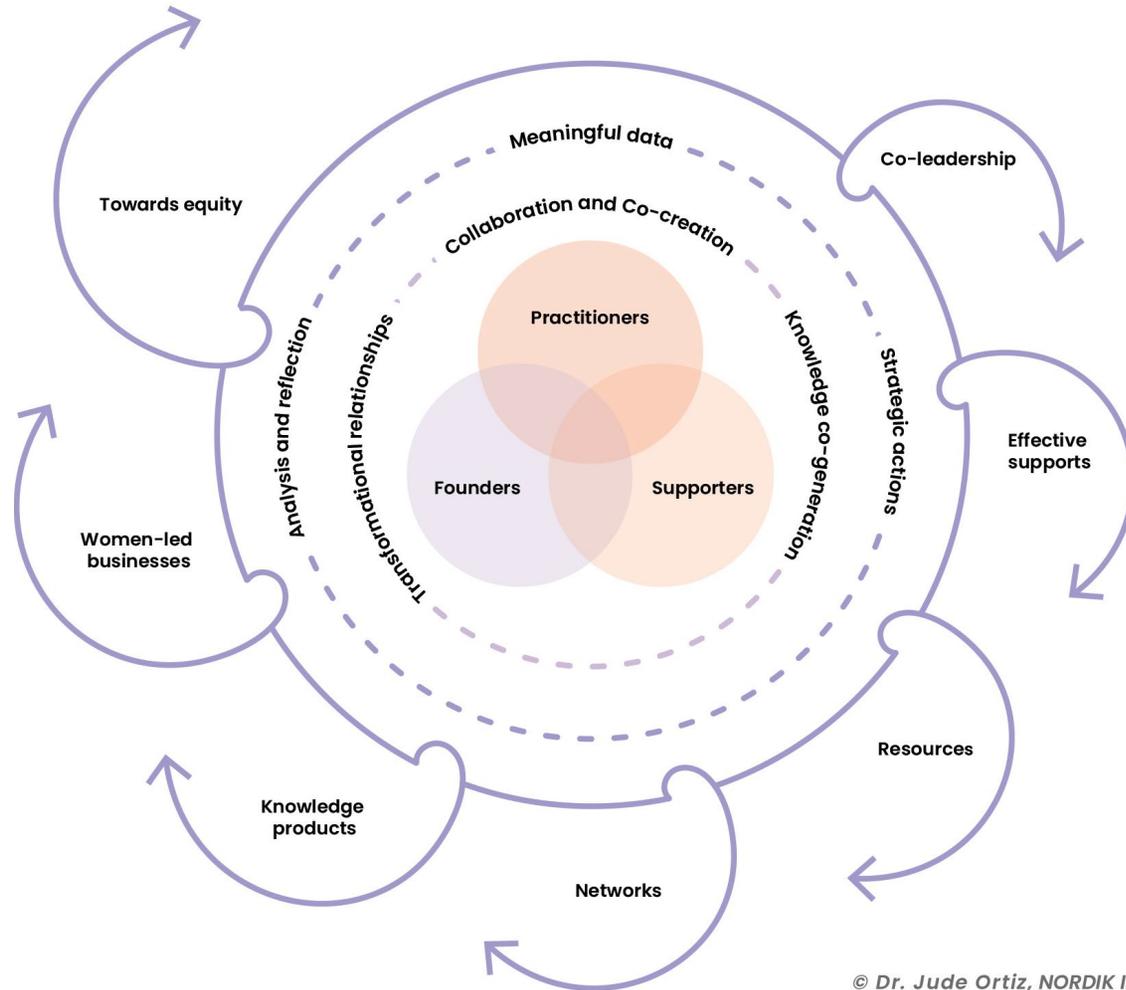
© Dr. Jude Ortiz, NORDIK Institute (2022)

Intentionally engaging founders and ecosystem supporters in emergent collaborative and co-creative practices builds trusting relationships, transforming them into a knowledge cogenerating network. The interaction increases understanding of diverse founders' contexts and needs, facilitating the development of critical infrastructure (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows) founders need to match their potential to flourish locally and/or globally. It simultaneously builds the entrepreneurial ecosystem's professional development, wellness, agency and resilience for centring equity.

Reflective practices foster a learning journey, revealing inner mind models, perspectives, attitudes and behaviours, and their impact on outer actions. The emergent nature of creative processes provide a transitioning space, a juncture for exploring, trying on and embracing new concepts. They contribute to: revealing narratives that maintain the status quo and the opportunity to rescript them; assessment of project and program progress and impact; and, the identification of support participants may be seeking in their individual and collective learning journey for undertaking this work (Ortiz, 2017, p. 36; 141; 199). The web of interaction contributes to developing co-leadership capacity and effective supports, resources, and knowledge products that underlay founders' ability to achieve their goals.

4.0
Activating Equity
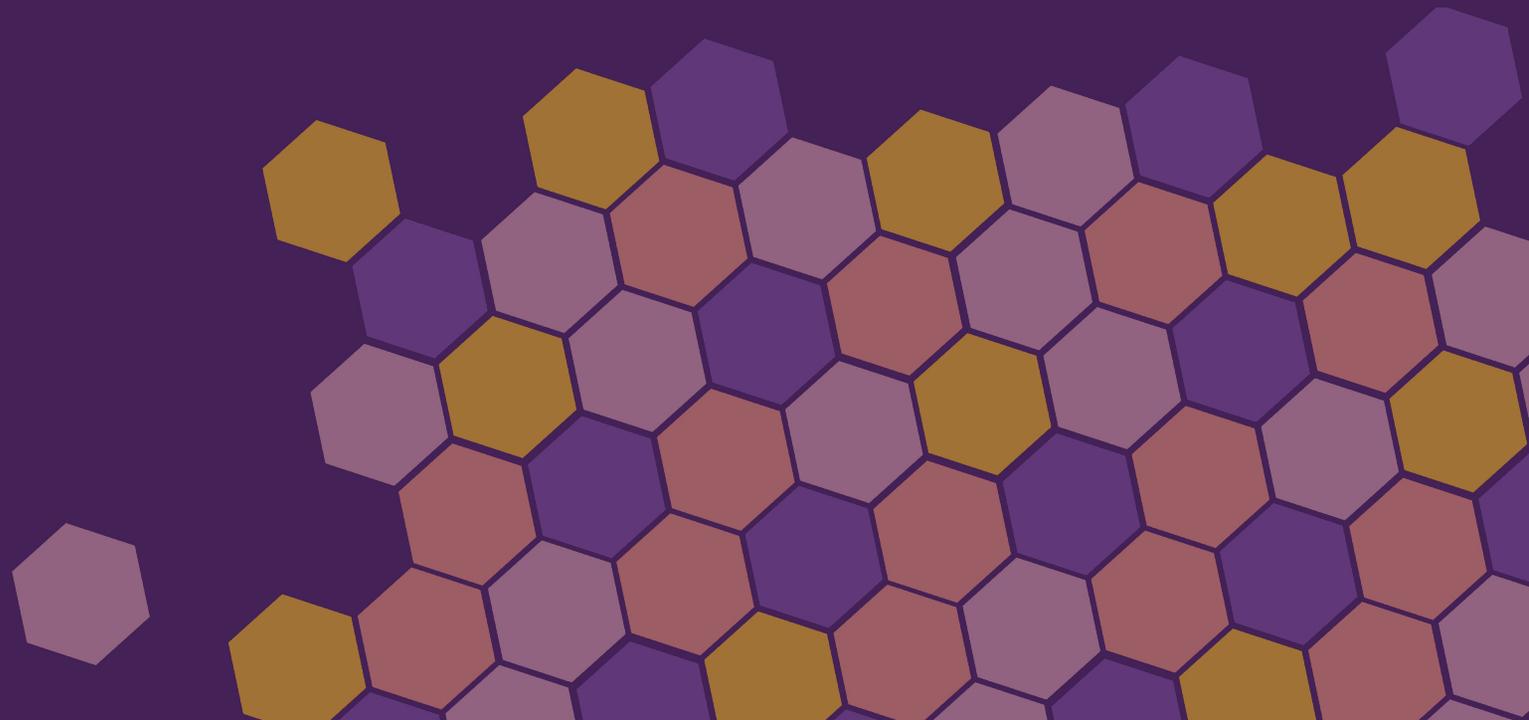
The Activating Equity section begins with the identification of three interconnected strategies for catalyzing their Equity-Centred Theory of Change. It then unpacks how each is being implemented, operationally and programmatically, and its impact. Catalyst One speaks to the importance of principled collaboration and co-creation in building equity, introducing the concept of co-leadership in undertaking systems change work while building each other's capacity to contribute how and where one can. Catalyst Two outlines ways the collaborative is engaging diverse founders and ecosystem supporters in the design and delivery of effective programming, as well as linking and leveraging ideas and resources to advance the work. Finally, it discusses Catalyst Three, data collection and developmental evaluation processes as pathways for analysis that support increasing capacity for timely, informed and collective decision making and accountability. The following section, **Ecosystem Impact (p. 33)**, highlights the project's impact, including ways the initiative is contributing to broader systems change and resilience.

4.1 Interconnected Catalyzing Strategies

Kania et al. (2022) state that equity-focused collective impact initiatives around the world have identified the following five strategies as foundational to centering equity: i) Ground the work in data and context, and target solutions; ii) Focus on systems change, in addition to programs and services; iii) Shift power within the collaborative; iv) Listen and act with community; and, v) Build equity leadership and accountability.

WOSEN incorporates these five strategies into three interconnected strategies to catalyze their equity-centred entrepreneurial ecosystem Theory of Change. While each of the three interconnected strategies speak to one key aspect of activation, implementation of them is based on WOSEN's CI framework, grounded in community development (CD) principles and embedded emergent processes of collaboration and co-creation that allow space for social innovation. Collectively they build professional development, wellness, agency and resilience for undertaking and advancing this work.

- Catalyst One outlines the underlying transformational processes;
- Catalyst Two addresses the need for entrepreneurial infrastructure; and,
- Catalyst Three speaks to analyzing impact and guiding timely strategic responses.

Figure 4: Theory of Change: Interconnected Catalyzing Strategies

CATALYST ONE	CATALYST TWO	CATALYST THREE
embody and embed a culture of collaboration and co-creation *(Transformation Process)*	Link and leverage ecosystem resources *(Create Infrastructure)*	Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions *(Analyze Impact)*
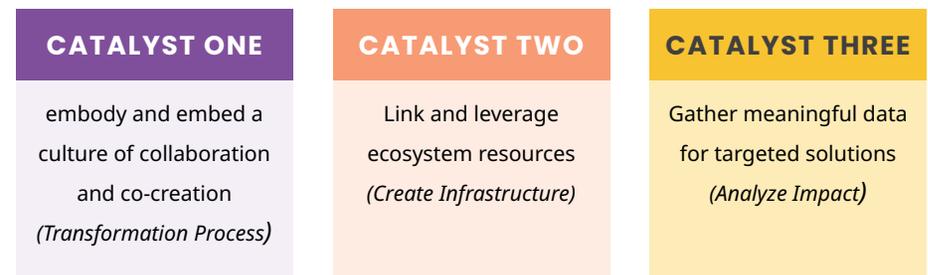
Builds professional development, wellness, agency and resilience for centring equity.

4.2 Catalyst One: Embody and embed a culture of collaboration and co-creation

Ground the work in WOSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, antiracist and decolonizing framework to build trust and capacity for embedding and embodying collaborative and co-creative processes, transforming transactional relationships into a knowledge cogenerating network.

WOSEN members are committed to understanding diverse founders' and ecosystem supporters' current contexts, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and networks and intentionally engaging them in a co-learning journey, supporting them in unpacking the various influences that drive outer actions. They aim to meet people where they are at and value each person, their current perspectives and mind models and contributions to the initiative including, their experiences, awareness, insights, arising questions, methodological practices and humor. The collaborative recognizes learning together is an experiential journey that facilitates unlearning and/or relearning while simultaneously building capacity to undertake such (Fenech et al., 2022). They are intentionally inviting people to learn together and to be open to change which includes: being uncomfortable at times; stepping into one's power; accepting responsibility and one's agency in hindering or spurring change; acknowledging and naming fear and uncertainty; and, accepting being where one is at that moment and the courage to let it go. They are intentionally supporting one another's individual and collective learning journeys, acknowledging the importance of their wellbeing, agency and resilience throughout their inner/outer journey, recognizing that life, work, social and family spheres overlap and may impact on the way people may be showing up.

Undertaking this work is challenging on many levels. To guide interaction and relationship and trust building between and among collaborative members, founders, supporters and broader ecosystem animators, they draw on their **WOSEN Design Principles (p. 12)**, an inclusive, antiracist and decolonizing framework. The Design Principles emerged from the first Accelerator Design Jam (2020) aimed to intentionally redirect the focus of current entrepreneurship support programs (i.e., typically 'one size fits all') toward the specific needs of the entrepreneurs the project intends to serve. Led by L4F, they were developed collaboratively, requiring extensive and intensive reflection, providing deep professional development opportunities. The Design Principles are based on sound inquiry around practitioners' orthodoxies (assumptions each person brings with them), ethnographic research, and the application of methodologies to surface the positionality of traditional programmes and program supports, including facilitators' perspectives and logistical structures. Later they were adopted by the collaborative as their overarching guiding principles influencing shared language, planning, implementation and evaluation. The seven Design Principles are: inclusive and accessible; decolonized; anti-oppressive systems informed; responsive; ecosystem approach; and human-centred.

WOSEN practitioners are intentionally learning to model the change they wish to see by embedding and embodying the Design Principles' concepts within themselves and their work, building capacity for interpreting the situational context in real time.

To facilitate individual and collective learning journeys the collaborative utilizes collaborative and co-creative processes, operationally and programmatically, throughout their collective impact model. They are defined as:

Collaboration: working together with two or more people to complete a project or process toward a common goal that benefits the team, organization and/or community.

Co-Creation: Different partners working together to create a framework to achieve a common goal together. Flexibility in implementation to achieve the same output.

Both processes are seen as pathways for innovation, shifting transactional relationships to transformative ones, enabling sharing and knowledge cogeneration. Collaboration and co-creation are emergent processes that carve out time to gather and to forge the necessary bonding and trusting relationships between and among founders, ecosystem supporters and practitioners – trust to voice ideas, opinions, counterpoints, and that solutions will be found. WOSEN considers them to be foundational in co-learning, grounding reflective practice, experiencing and enacting one's inner learnings and outer actions, and in the ability to support others' in their exploration. Such practices often reveal participants' orthodoxies by shifting awareness, enabling fostering and adopting new narratives, spurring understanding, co-leadership, novel ideas, implementation, evolution and the identification of next steps.

4.2.1 Building equity leadership and accountability

Collaboration and co-creation practices extend to WOSEN's leadership approach. Although Pillar is the administrative lead in partnership with

SI Canada, SVX, NORDIK and L4F, operationally, leadership and project accountability is distributed across the partnering organizations and staff. The following outlines WOSEN's equity-centred leadership culture at the project level, operationally, and programmatically, providing opportunities for diverse practitioners, founders and ecosystem supporters to come together to share, discern and collectively learn ways of co-navigating these challenging times and rapidly changing contexts.

Leadership is seen as a creative, participatory process of collaboration and co-creation. It involves working in a manner that supports people to be open and willing to embrace change and be changed through: letting go of attachment to preconceived ideas; being in the moment; trusting the process of sharing and generating knowledge; and, making sense and meaning of it by working through it with others, building professional capacity for equity practices, in general, and women founders in particular. It is a courageous process and a balancing act of holding tight to one's notions, and being prepared to consider and accept others' views to achieve a common goal. Leadership also is about taking a stance, making a commitment to incorporating ideas and embodying and embedding them in practice.

WOSEN's leadership form may best be considered on a continuum of collaborative, changemaking and disruptive-emergent leadership. It sees its leadership form as a co-led collaborative with co-creative processes supporting one another's development journey. It is a means of sharing accountability. Weaver, Fulton, & Hardin (2020) speak to the need for effective forms of leadership to support deep, durable transformative change in navigating through the uncertainty of the current context of the global pandemic, social inequities and economic challenges. In the collective impact model, organizations with " ... *different viewpoints and perspectives are committed to working towards shared goals. Relationships, trust, and commitment are seen as strengths to build on and adapt from to address new needs emerging across communities.*" (p.6).

Fenech et al. (2022) describe changemaking leadership as being "... *leadership that aims to galvanize others to step into their power and contribute to change for the greater good.*" (p.56). They explain that:

> "*Leadership often requires the ability to shift between being a leader, an enabler, a supporter, and even a follower. It means knowing when to lead and when to facilitate, when to speak and when to let others speak, when to drive change and when to co-lead with others. These different roles require different capacities, mindsets and skills. For this reason, it is crucial to build the capacity of leaders to listen and to be fully attentive to their present context so that they can determine what kind of leadership role or approach is most appropriate. In order to do so, leaders must be able to listen deeply, recognize what is happening around them, and exercise empathy.*" (p.57)

A Disruptive-Emergent leadership involves:

> "*... lean[ing] into embracing the complexity and ambiguity of systems change, recognizing the importance of dramatic revisioning that centres equity as the guiding purpose and force. There is certainty around the overarching WHY of working together, yet fluidity around the who, what and how. There is a north star, yet the strategies, actions, and actors are fluid and emergent in nature, learning and adapting along the way. Unlike collaborative leadership, disruptive-emergent leadership is convened and coordinated from both nowhere and anywhere at the same time since it is not centreed around a person(s) or organization(s).*" (Weaver et al., 2020, p.8).

WOSEN's leadership culture incorporates elements of each of these approaches. As a sector-specific, time limited project it has a convening and coordinating centre. It plays an invaluable role as a living lab, a co-learning space for system change through participatory ecosystem engagement designed to collectively build capacity for advancing this challenging work.

Operationally, the collaborative provides its members opportunities throughout the initiative to embody and grow into equity-centred leadership by inviting

and inspiring people to 'step into their own power' (Fenech et al., 2022, p.56) contributing in areas where they are strong while increasing their capacity in others. "*Authentic leadership is an inside out process; only by practicing and embodying it is it possible to transfer its value and impact to your participants, your strategy, and your other stakeholders.*" (Fenech et al., p.22).

Programmatically, the collaborative sees founders ecosystem supporters and its members as co-leading development and delivery, inviting them to actively engage, to share, generate knowledge and increase understanding. WOSEN practitioners aim to raise awareness of concepts of leadership by highlighting what founders and ecosystem supporters can do within the realm of their practices, ventures, services and/or organizations to: surface systemic barriers; illuminate how actions tend to either hinder or support equity; and, ways to retain, direct and/or reshape the allocation, flow and prioritization of resources.

WOSEN'S SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

The WOSEN partners collectively established a project implementation plan identifying key people and the shared decision-making process based on the RACI framework (Responsible, Accountable; Consulted; Informed). It gathers input from everyone to shape the project from budgets to program delivery.

Teams were established to manage the project, with each being led by a representative from a member organization in partnership with the others. The organizational teams are:

- Administrative
- Program Areas:
  - Women in Social Enterprise (WISE)
  - Women-Centred Innovation Learning (WIL)
  - Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development (SEED)
  - Investment Readiness Supports (IRS)

- Developmental Evaluation (DE)
- Knowledge Products (KP) (members differ depending on upon the product under development)

At the outset the collaborative reviewed the four programming areas with each regional partner identifying the number of programs and the associated costs they had the capacity to deliver, ensuring provincial, urban and rural program coverage. As the project progressed under/over forecasts were reviewed and agreement was reached regarding dispersing the funds within or beyond budget sections to cover minor discrepancy between projected and actual costs, as well as identify priority areas within sections, for example, specific knowledge products and DE reports.

Additional staffing was sought with an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) hiring priority as the implementation plan unfolded to broaden the collaborative's voices and perspectives, gaining invaluable insight and direction; and build practitioner capacity for backbone support. For example, Pillar hired an Inclusive Program Designer whose time is partially dedicated to WOSEN. Contractors hired to fill specific deliverables (e.g., development of video spotlight series, guest presenters) were also considered within an EDI criteria.

WOSEN practitioner project-wide and program meetings are an important space for cogenerating and mobilizing knowledge across the breadth of the initiative revealing:

i.   the founders: where they are at; what they are experiencing; what they need in order to feel successful; and processes to support them in meeting their goals; and,

ii. practitioners: what they are learning, unlearning and experiencing, and the support they need to undertake this work.

4.3 Catalyst Two: Link and leverage ecosystem resources

Adopt an ecosystem approach by placing women with lived experience at the centre of inquiry, engaging them and ecosystem supporters in actively understanding their contexts and needs, creating effective supports, and leveraging and reallocating assets to enable founders to flourish.

Catalyst One speaks about embodying and embedding a culture of collaboration and co-creation, transforming relationships into a cogenerating knowledge network. This subsection outlines the various ways WOSEN members are utilizing these processes to actively engage founders and ecosystem supporters in co-creating entrepreneurial infrastructure – the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, relationships and networks and resources to meet their specific needs. It focuses on the collaborative's program methodology for designing, developing and delivering effective programming, and ways interaction between the parties facilitates linking and leveraging all participants' resources to support women that are underrepresented and underserved in business. Lastly, it highlights knowledge products that are intended to extend the initiative's learnings to those not currently participating in WOSEN, building broader entrepreneurial capacity for centring equity.

4.3.1 Engaging the ecosystem in creating infrastructure

Fenech et al. (2022) describe systems thinking as a way of understanding the interplay of factors that spur or hinder change. It contributes to identifying the people and organizations that could be engaged to influence how the ecosystem functions (p.39). To spark meaningful change, WOSEN committed to listening to and acting with the entrepreneurial community, intentionally engaging diverse ecosystem supporters in redesigning infrastructure, building shared purpose and collective strength in the creation of meaningful and effective equity-centred supports to enable underrepresented and underserved founders to achieve their aspirations.

The following image portrays WOSEN's ecosystem engagement with women at the core, the central focus, and the ways the various supporters and practitioners are contributing to advancing equity.

Figure 5: Ecosystem Engagement and Contribution
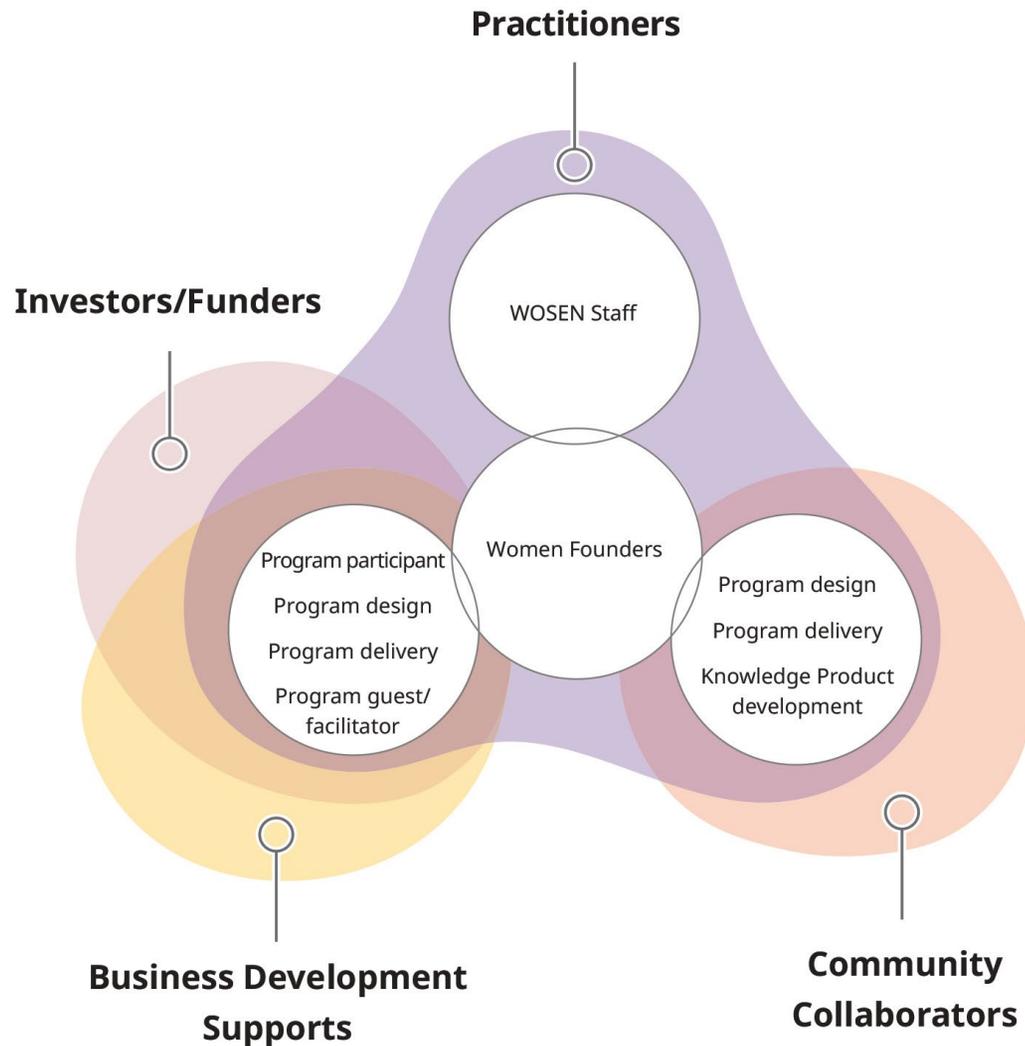
4.3.2 Co-Creation program methodology

The 'one size fits all' programming available in the current enterprise development system tends to prioritize rapid growth businesses and sectors that are viewed to have the potential to become quickly profitable for shareholders and investors. This appears to be the dominant narrative of the purpose or outputs of a startup. As a result, women who are more likely to centre sustainable growth and create service-based businesses are particularly underrepresented and underserved (Cukier et al., 2020).

To provide effective entrepreneurial supports for this population, WOSEN's program methodology places women and their needs at the centre of the conversation in understanding their context and barriers, and intentionally engages diverse founders and ecosystem supporters in cycles of dynamic processes of collaboration and co-creation to design, deliver and evolve programs to meet founders' needs.

Each program area is led by one of WOSEN's member organizations in collaboration with other WOSEN team members and ecosystem supporters. Collectively they are responsible for the program methodology, identification and engagement of delivery partners including of guest facilitators/speakers, coaches, investors; program evaluation and data collection tools; and its innovation for the next session delivered in a series or the following program delivery cycle. WOSEN practitioners share their programs' development and evolution with the whole project team to facilitate learning across the collaborative.

WOSEN's participatory processes fosters a co-learning environment, cogenerating new understanding that underpins the creation of critical infrastructure, (i.e., the knowledge, attitudes, behavious, relational networks and resource flows) while building professional capacity, desire and drive to address them (Fenech et al., 2022, p.23-24). The processes surface orthodoxies and blockages that hinder developing more equitable and just economies. They raise awareness of the various perspectives underpinning the dominant narrative and the complex roles and relationships that hold it in place, thus, revealing founders' needs.

In each of the four program areas, the WOSEN collaborative first undertakes the following process in the below stated sequence:

1. Ethnographic research with those with lived experiences (i.e., women with business aspirations and existing founders) which becomes the basis for program development in each program.

2. Based on the research gathered, surface key insights to frame program design that meet the founders where they are at, and to support building entrepreneurial competencies that may increase wellbeing, agency and resilience.

3. Draw on WOSEN members' respective entrepreneurial ecosystem relationships, gathering community collaborators, business developers, mentors, guest speakers and investors to support programs. This also includes sensitizing these collaborators on the founders' context and lived experiences, and building awareness of their needs to better align the support offered.

To continue to foster intentional program co-creation the collaborative focuses on:

1. Recognizing and respecting existing relationships between entrepreneurs and business development supports, investors/funder and their offerings;

2. Articulating and getting feedback on what entrepreneurial supports need to be built, strengthened, redesigned, or reconfigured to create inclusive economies and just societies utilizing a social enterprise model;

3. Co-creating cycles with founders and supporters;

4. Continuing to gather feedback from founders during programming and adjusting the program design in an adaptive and flexible way based on their needs; and,

5. Developing pathways to create and deliver such.

Interaction between ecosystem supporters and WOSEN practitioners during the program design and development processes build on existing knowledge and assets in the development of new supports and resources, while increasing supporters' understanding of where and how they can play a leadership role in addressing systems change. The collaborative encourages those participants in leadership positions to adopt transformative practices to shift mind models and power by linking, leveraging, reallocating and redirecting assets to flow in more equitable ways. Similarly, during program delivery, the authentic environment between founders, supporters and practitioners facilitates drawing on everyone's resources to further support the development and expansion of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to include founders' needs.

The following diagram depicts WOSEN's intentional program development and evolution process. Design Jams are collaborative, co-creative activities designed to foster new and/or deeper understanding of the issue, leading to generating innovative approaches and solutions.

Figure 6: Program Development and Evolution Cycle
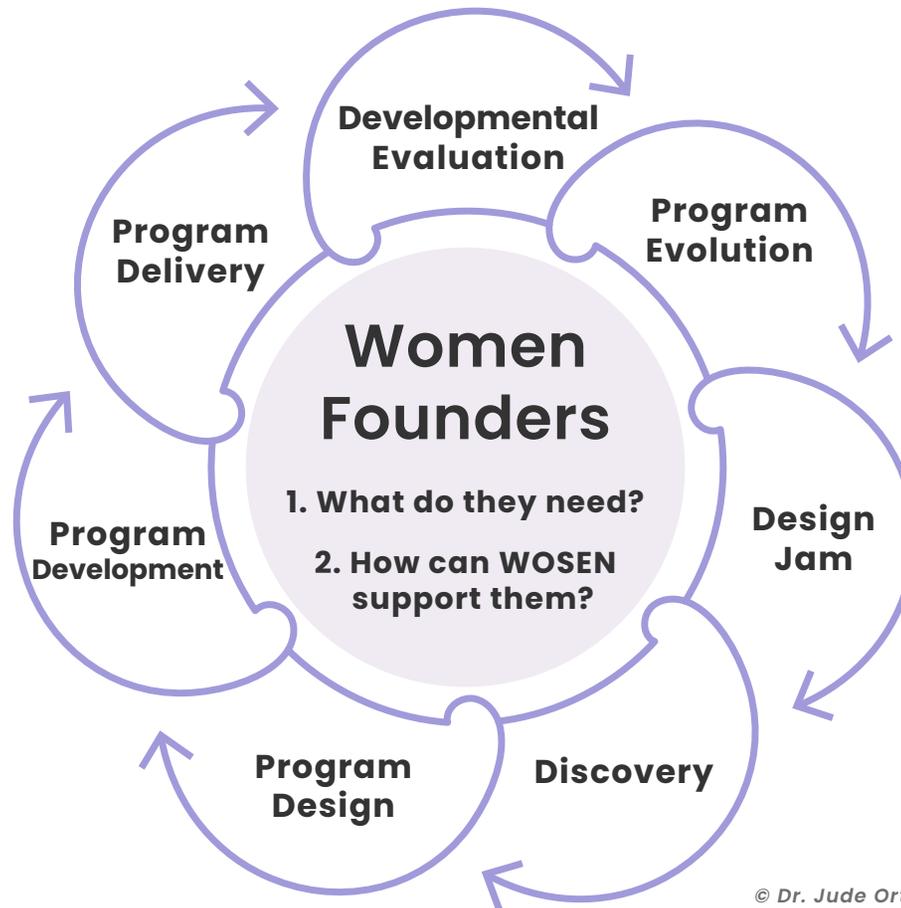
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- Design Jam: program developers gather to surface orthodoxies, positionality and intersectionality; map discovery processes, questions and key informational sources

- Discovery: ethnographic research - dialogue and discussion conducted by individual practitioners to engage ecosystem contributors including women entrepreneurs, business supporters, community partners, and organizational knowledge and literature in understanding context, existing resources and gaps. The Four Worlds of Sustainability (Brown, 2007) provided a framework for organizing the exploration:

  - Psychological Influences: intentions, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, expectations;

  - Behavioural Influences: observable actions, competencies/skills influences in the environment that hinder/support behaviour, objective measurements;

  - Cultural Influences: shared values/ history/experience, communications, relationships; and,

  - Systemic Influences: networks, economy, government/policy, law,social systems, education systems, collective action.

- Program Design Jam: WOSEN program delivery team(s) share discovery, identify objectives and draft outline to address system needs; incorporate Design Principles; identify community partners, guest speakers/facilitators and coaching component

- Program Development: bring together program delivery team(s) partners and guest speakers/facilitators to collaborate and co-create program session(s)

- Delivery: WOSEN practitioners, guest speakers/facilitators; coaches

- Developmental Evaluation: reflection and analysis assesses the learnings and impact, which is nested in the transformational cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action

- Program Evolution: responsive design during delivery in real time; integrating learnings and emergent understanding at end of program; adjustments to meet program objectives and deliverables. The redesign, iteration or evolution occurs in real time during delivery or at the end in preparation for the next delivery cycle.

This program methodology has led to the evolution of WOSEN's four program areas transforming them into engaging and meaningful interactions and learning experiences between and among participants, facilitators, guest speakers, and coaches, and has guided the creation of knowledge products intended to build capacity in the broader ecosystem in supporting equity-seeking groups. For more information regarding WOSEN's four program areas please see **Appendix 1: Program Areas and Knowledge Products (p. 48)**.

4.3.3 Effective program delivery

WOSEN practitioners and delivery partners are intentionally creating authentic learning environments – immersive, experiential, safe and brave spaces with attention to the amount of content, timing and pacing, and incorporation of diverse methods and activities to support founders' entrepreneurial journey from ideation to the development and evolution of their businesses and/or services.

In contrast to many educational training programs that focus on transferring knowledge to founders, WOSEN's programs aim to build on participants' experiences, introducing material in ways that scaffold their thinking and learning and facilitate sharing with other participants to advance everyone's learning. This approach to program delivery can be very challenging to implement, requiring embedding and embodying the commitment to being present in the moment, and in-depth experience to respond. Each session is considered to be an active discovery in themselves, demanding all be present and continuously engaged in the process and delivery. This methodology transforms program delivery into a shared learning journey, encouraging founders to articulate needs in real time, and builds facilitators' capacity of being aware of and understand how to incorporate women's needs into future plans (Fenech et al., 2022, p.22). Continuous active engagement and ongoing communication between and among practitioners, guest facilitator/speakers and coaches and women participants builds relationships, increasing connection and attunement, enabling nimble and targeted responses to arising concerns or requests for additional resources.

Programs aim to create a safe and brave[8] environment to validate participants' tacit knowledge and support surfacing different conversations to spur self learning, individual developmental shifts and relationship building that underpin healthy, resilient founders. Thus, they are primarily dialogical, creative-based engagement providing participants scaffold learning, tailored support to develop new skills or perspectives, imbued with room for emergence, integration and adaptation. They foster deepening understanding of the issues around equality and women entrepreneurship, allowing questions to arise, surface needed supports, and innovative solutions, contributing to the development of effective resources, new networks and investment opportunities.

Each session is intentionally designed to be in service of women, rather than the delivery organization or in support of any predominant entrepreneurship narratives. It is co-created and input-focused, rather than solely output-focused, surfacing different conversations to spur self learning, individual developmental shifts and relationship building that ground healthy, resilient entrepreneurs.

The programs are designed to provide stage appropriate business development skills within a decolonized framework, building awareness of, and capacity for, affecting system change through co-leading equity-focused operations, driving the future toward more inclusive participation in business and society. Recognizing that founders' wellbeing, agency and resilience is inseparable from the operation of their business, personal development aspects are incorporated into the programs. Topics include, for example, concepts of health and wellbeing; power and privilege; personal values and vision; imposter syndrome and trauma around money to support women in their journey, and appreciate the connections between.

"*Lasting social change can only happen if we are well, self-aware, and healthy. Along with a growing number of initiatives and publications, our work demonstrates that wellbeing is an essential element of entrepreneurial support*." (Fenech et al., 2022, p.76).

Depending on the learning objectives, programs include individual, small group and plenary activities. Engaging participants in creative, process-based methods that support knowledge cogeneration, reflection and sense-making enable the integration of new perspectives and validation of oneself. Following are some examples of open-ended activities that invite founders to show up as they are and participate within their comfort level.

- **Story telling**: elicit personal narratives – who the participants are, to validate lived experiences; gain insight into ways others are moving through issues; Stories are more than events – they are documentary of emotions that impact perspectives and wellbeing

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8   Arao & Clemens (2013) **From Safe to brave spaces**; Aware-La **https://www.awarela.org/**. **Brave Spaces Guidelines and Communication**

- **Dialogue**: reflection and exploration through sharing circles: building understanding, awareness and raising questions.

- **Check-in and check-out**: monitors health and wellbeing and guides session exchanges, responsiveness and adaptation; fosters understanding how participants are showing up and engaging (or not) and changes over time.

WOSEN activities engage participants in a variety of forms of intelligence and learning styles in creating authentic learning environments with the intent of introducing them to entrepreneurs thereby encouraging them to integrate these processes into their operations. Examples of these activities include:

1. Integrating the three H's:

- **Head** (cognitive engagement)
- **Heart** (emotional enablement)
- **Hands** (doing, enacting) (Dewey, 1910; Singleton, 2015)[9]

2. The 3V's - Learning Styles, VARK, A Model of Learning:

- **Visual**: Prefers to learn and retains information better through images, videos and graphics.
- **Verbal**: Learns and retains information better through hearing and speaking.
- **Visceral (Kinaesthetic)**: Learns and retains information better through hands-on activities (Fleming & Mills, 1992)[10].

3. Generative listening, i.e., being an attentive presence, clarifying and interpreting meaning, providing empathy and acting generatively (Scharmer, 2007)[11].

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9   Dewey. J. (1910) How We Think. Reprinted in 2012. New York: Barnes and Noble Booksellers Incorporated. Singleton (2015). **Head, Heart and Hands Model for Transformative Learning: Place as Context for Changing Sustainability Values**
10   Fleming & Mills (1992) **Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection**
11   Scharmer, C(2007). **Uncovering the Blind Spot of Leadership**

Fenech et al., 2022 note the importance of such practices:

"*When designing learning journeys, it is important to make use of all forms of intelligence available to human beings - our head, heart, hands, and the connection with all that is larger than ourselves. These are all important methods of receiving information and are all part of the way individuals learn as whole humans. By using all our senses and all forms of intelligence, we can uncover new insights, discover different perspectives, understand and integrate learnings more fully, and make better decisions.*" (p.58).

Evidence gathered during the sessions, through dialogue, observation and/or surveys guide program iteration/redesign. Deepening awareness supports responding to participant needs and/or arising issues through the development of new business tools and evolving strategies that better enable founders to achieve their aspirations. These processes increase ecosystem supporters' and practitioners' capacity to serve this demographic in meaningful ways. For more information about data collection processes incorporated into programming methodology, please see the following section, **Catalyst Three: Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions (p. 31)**.

4.3.4 Knowledge products for broader ecosystem change

Knowledge products are intended to assist systems change by informing practices and influencing policy inequalities. They aim to increase the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem's contextual knowledge, ways of fostering respectful relationships and developing effective supports that serve people who are underrepresented in business. The range of tools include: reports, program resources, project resources, entrepreneur profiles, case studies, blogs, television promotions, journal articles, podcasts, and news articles.

The collaborative has engaged ecosystem supporters in co-learning how to consolidate and translate knowledge collectively generated through the initiative into products to share with others. *Pollinating Change: Design Principles for a Better World* is one example aiming to facilitate reimaging the entrepreneurial ecosystem toward supporting equity-seeking communities beyond the life of the project. It is a process-based game exploring ways **WOSEN Design Principles (p. 12)** an anti-racist, decolonizing framework, can be applied. It is in the final stage of development.

WOSEN practitioners centre and integrate these Design Principles into their program design and facilitation. They generate insightful conversations and deepen self-awareness, thereby increasing professional capacity to better meet program participants' needs. The *Pollinating Change* game provides participants with potentially new perspectives regarding program considerations, and illustrates how effective business supports based on these principles could be designed and implemented. The game creates space for teams and working groups to surface big (and small) reflections, increasing their understanding of how diversity, equity and belonging shift relationships with one another and the environment. When teams integrate the game play into their meetings and/or design sessions members may become more aware of the factors and underlying influences that foster, or hinder, the development and delivery of meaningful and effective equity-centered entrepreneurial programs.

The development of knowledge products and the sharing and distribution of project learnings and impact beyond WOSEN is considered a very important component of systems change. WOSEN's progress in these two areas has been hampered by the sheer intensity and time demands of the overall project. **The Story of WOSEN, Part One, the Interim Report** (Section 3.4 Building awareness and ecosystem capacity, p.50) identifies a number of high quality pieces the initiative has produced to date. This year (2021-22) and until the project sunsets (March, 2023) the collaborative aims to continue generating strategic products to extend its effect on the ecosystem beyond the life of the project.
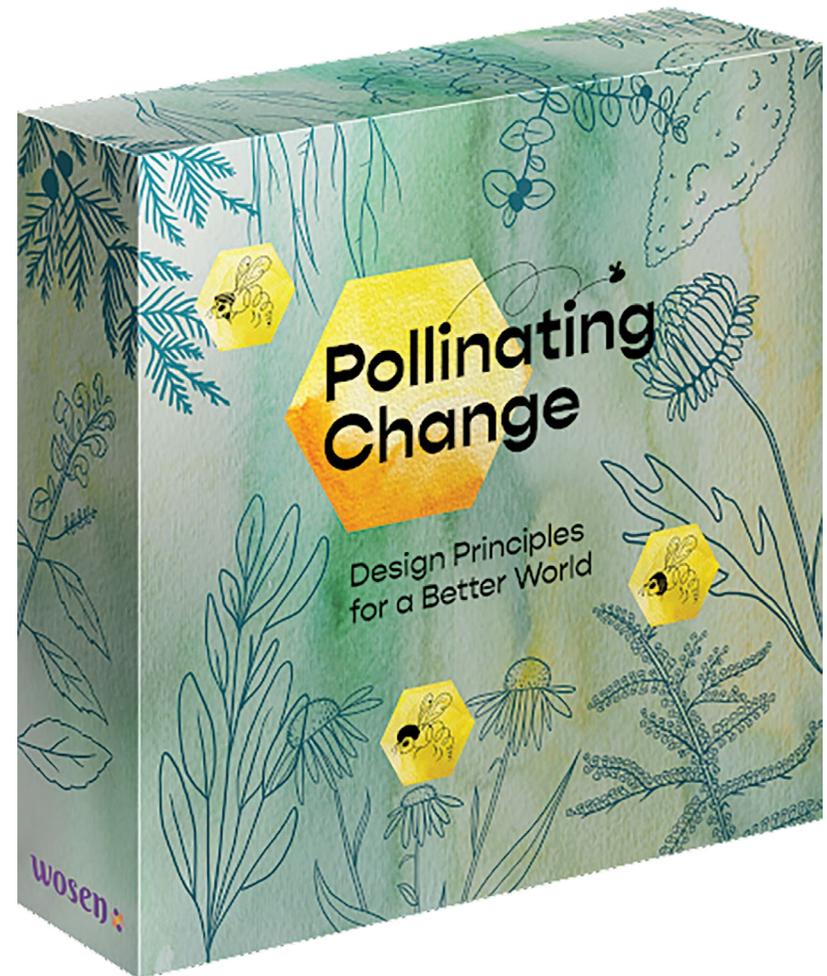
4.4 Catalyst Three: Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions

Gather robust qualitative and quantitative data through a variety tools, providing an authentic and multi-perspective context for analyzing operation and program effectiveness, and embed iterative processes (i.e. observe, reflect, plan and act) to continuously respond to arising concerns and emerging innovation and evolution.

This section speaks to gathering data that the collaborative identifies as meaningful in analyzing the project's impact and progress in meeting its goals, and ways its diverse collection methods contribute to guiding timely, informed responses.

WOSEN's work is grounded in data, contextualized within entrepreneurial ecosystems and broader social change movements. The collaborative considers the DE process to be a significant contributor to building practitioner capacity to articulate the relationship between goals, assessment and actions, thereby informing and guiding project and program discussions and strategic decisions as the project unfolds.

Some of the data collection targets deliverables identified in the Contribution Agreement with FedDev Ontario, while others are intended to reveal aspects of what the partners consider important to supporting a women's entrepreneurial ecosystem as well influencing broader systemic change. Once each program has been developed, the delivery team delves into identifying what they specifically want to know at the individual session or program level, i.e., data that would contribute to the DE assessment framework and information required by the funder. The DE team supports the program teams in their participatory evaluation process (Cheuy et al., 2022 p.7), tailoring questions and developing online collection tools. Pillar is responsible for populating the project-wide data sharing Airtable platform.

Program data is collected through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods tailored to actively engage participants, guest facilitators/speakers and coaches, delivery partners and practitioners in the evaluation process. The continual process of observing, reflecting, planning and acting/implementing gathers verbal and nonverbal feedback. The writing up and sharing through reflection sessions with colleagues, guest speakers, facilitators, and coaches generates deeper awareness and an evolving understanding of women contexts, their needs, entrepreneurial ecosystem barriers, and support WOSEN may be able to provide in mitigating the challenges.

The diversity of data collection methods and feedback loops greatly contributes to the richness of the data. They include: registration/application forms; intake forms (one-on-one practitioner interviews with potential participants and coaches); session start check-in and closing check-out; in session dialogue, discussion, storytelling, creative development activities; evaluation forms; end of program survey; and six-month post-participation survey. Ongoing program level discussions and reflection on incoming data within the delivery team ensures feedback and insights are captured and integrated into program redesign and evolution. In multi-session programs, timely data enables nimble responses to, for example, requests for additional direction or resources, or arising issues. Data supports adapting the next session plan to incorporate or address such.

At the conclusion of each program delivery cycle the team reviews the field of data, providing time to reflect, make sense and meaning of it and their experiences, and consolidate it into a summative review to share with the WOSEN collaborative in generating further understanding and knowledge co-generation. Project-wide meetings provide space for fireside chats with topics determined by practitioners, and for vetting summative reviews. Timely episodic practitioners reflections developed by the DE team gather data on: key learnings on a variety of project components; professional development; arising, burning or ongoing questions; supports needed (if any); and next steps.

These sources and cycles of data collection underpin shared learning, creating robust individual and collective meaning-making that flows into project and program methodology; evaluation tools and analysis; identification, creation and mobilization of knowledge products; summative reviews; implementation strategies; and, the Story of WOSEN reports.

5.0
Ecosystem Impact

Since the initiative launched its first program in early 2020, it has:

ENGAGED

941

PARTICIPANTS

RESIDING IN OVER

140

URBAN, RURAL AND FIRST NATION COMMUNITIES ACROSS ONTARIO;

ASSISTED IN UNLOCKING

$8.8M

FOR WOMEN FOUNDERS
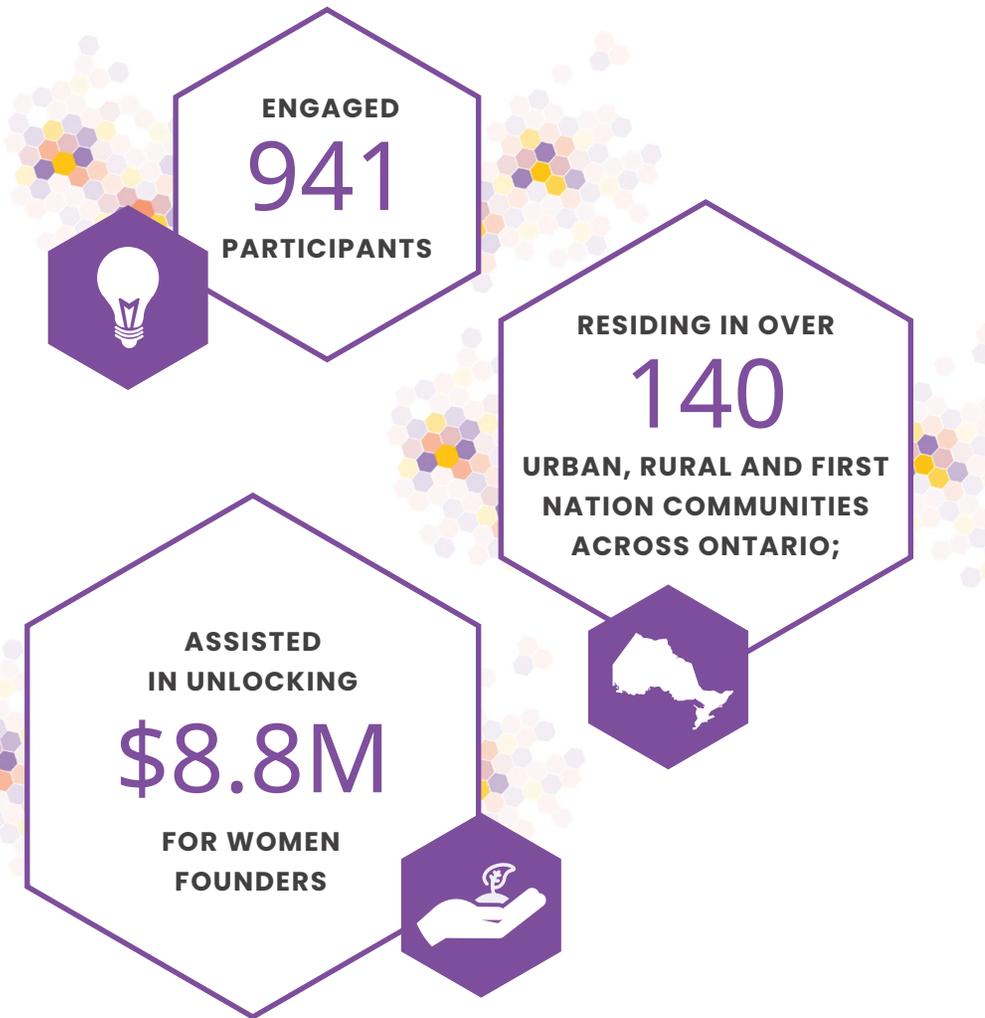
The impact of WOSEN activities on the ecosystem is assessed in terms of changes in founders', ecosystem supporters' and practitioners' knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and relationships and networks – i.e., infrastructure, that underpins the ability to adapt in meeting one's goals – as well as quantitative data around engagement and participation. The following three sections highlight the impact of participation within each group.

5.1 Impact on Founders

_____

"At the start I was concerned that there might be "man-splaining", "ageism", and financial numbers but WOSEN made us feel that our ideas are workable, doable, and great if we thought it was great. Most other colleagues had run my ideas down, and that affected my self-esteem and demotivated me from continuing. I was permitted voice, visibility, and racial identity along with others"

(CSI Spring Start participant)
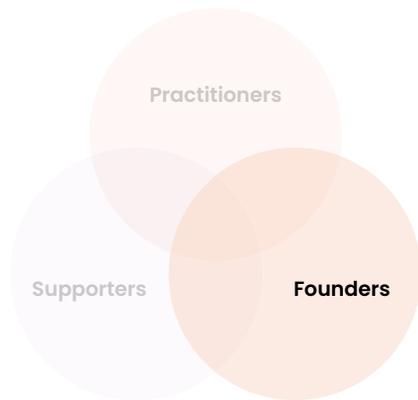
Founders' data were gathered from the End of Program Participant Survey. Similar comments and reflections from founders appeared across the various offerings, suggesting the learnings and impact were not limited to one program or geographic area, but rather, across the province and within rural, urban and First Nation communities. Following is a selection of founder quotes regarding the impact of participating in the program.

Multiple ways to participate in meaningful ways:
- *"Breakout rooms encouraged me to come outside of my comfort zones, making me more comfortable to speak in the main group."* (CSI Spring Start participant)

- *"I felt like I was able to overcome my social anxiety to actively and genuinely share my thoughts, as well as build human connections with my cohort and presenters both in the weekly sessions and outside of them."* (CSI Spring Start participant)

- *"I like how each session has a focus, and yet the structure of the program is flexible enough that every participant seems to be able to take away knowledge and skills they are looking for even though we might be at different stages of developing our social enterprise."* (Rural Start Fall 2021 participant)

Created an inclusive and empathetic space:
- *"We can do it (as entrepreneurs) even if we haven't learnt business in the traditional way."* (WISE Grow Year 3 participant)

- *"Women problem-solving their needs and issues with other women is so empowering. We are more alike than we think, in juggling demands of life, our passions, our loved ones, our necessity to earn an income, and our desire to make a difference in our communities. Well worth the time to join forces with others who can relate, while we gain valuable information about our social enterprise process."* (NORDIK Fall Start participant)

- *"Every start of the program we have a check-in and those couple of minutes hearing everyone speak about their feelings, struggles, and success has been uplifting knowing I'm not facing my journey alone."* (SVX Summer Start participant)

Increased content knowledge:
The three most frequently noted knowledge gains were:
1) How to plan and organize business ideas, including using business model canvas; 2) How to properly research ideas and quantify the data; and, 3) how to plan and map the stages of social enterprise ideas, moving from ideation into reality.

- *"Having a mentor is critical. They are more than just a mentor, they are a champion and as good as family members in the entrepreneurial space!"* (WISE Grow Year 3 participant)

- *"I need to understand my buyer's journey - what are they thinking/feeling at each stage of engaging with me? How can I interact effectively at those stages?"* (Rural Start Fall 2021 participant)

Felt more energized, confident, self motivated; and the vast majority felt comfortable reaching out to the newly created relationships and networks:

"We need a strong network of like-minded people who will encourage us in a safe way." (Rural Start Fall 2021 participant)

"I am SO grateful for my experience with WOSEN. I learned to think about my business much more holistically … not just about how to create value, but also how to avoid harm … identify a totally new audience for my work, and realized that I will need to market to them in a different way than my current audience." (Rural Start Fall 2021 participant)

"I also feel like I have a MUCH better ideas for how to align my business activities with my values. The WOSEN Design Principles were a great inspiration for that." (Rural Start Fall 2021 participant)

5.2 Impact on Supporters

"SEED [program] was an excellent opportunity to reflect on what I know, consider what I don't know, and think about how I hold space for folks who are at different stages of their learning journeys (in both directions)."

(SEED Summer 2021 participant)

This section focuses on data from ecosystem supporters who participated in the Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development (SEED) program. Feedback from supporters' who were delivery partners, or were contracted by WOSEN for services such as guest speakers, facilitators, mentors and/or funders, etc., was gathered through program engagement conversations, dialogues and reflections and are not included in this section of the report. Their feedback and comments have, however, informed and contributed to program and knowledge product evolution.

During the 2021-22 fiscal year WOSEN delivered four SEED programs: *Rebuilding our Economy for Shared Prosperity,* focusing on how to respond to the needs of all social entrepreneurs with an anti-oppressive and systems-informed lens. The modules allowed for considerable dialogue and self-reflection in building empathy and capacity for centring equity. Participants included business development individuals and organizations, community collaborators, leaders, investors/funders, and coaches. Data were gathered from the End of Program Participant survey. Ecosystem supporters' key learnings and reflections were not limited to one geographic delivery area, which echo the founders' data in this regard.

Practitioners

Supporters   Founders
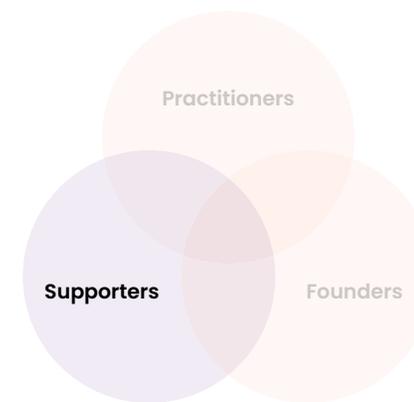
Supporters' key learnings:

A number of participants indicated an increase in their understanding of how colonialism, white supremacy and intergenerational trauma influence women founders, expressing how deeply it is enshrined in all peoples' behaviours and goals. They embraced the idea that they have the power to affect change, no matter how small their actions are, as well as the need to question their automatic responses and expectations in an effort to think and behave in more equitable ways. Others noted an appreciation of listening as a very powerful tool particularly when coupled with acting upon the speaker's stories to assist in shifting mindsets.

Changes in attitudes include:

- The vast majority of participants felt comfortable reaching out to the newly created relationships with other participants and presenters. They also identified an:
- Increased desire to make the world a better place;
- Felt more empathic, confident, excited/energized, self motivated;
- Less fear of risk; and,
- Saw challenges as opportunities.

Ways supporters intend to integrate equity-centred learnings into their work include:
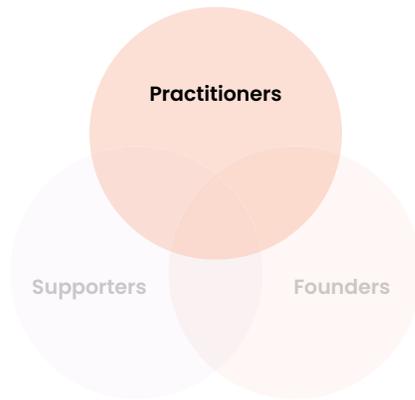
- "*Institutions as bastions of systematized inequity can be influenced by mini-freedoms of how their employees can interpret the "rules". The idea is to create a brave space for white settlers to learn and unlearn.*"
- "*I am now actively seeking out ways to improve our programming at my workplace to make it more accessible and inclusive for all entrepreneurs. Decolonizing my work is a continuous process and will continue to be something I focus on throughout my career.*"
- "*This series re-affirmed the importance of taking time to ground into the moment and kick-off workshops/events that I host with ample time for that grounding and context-setting work. I'm feeling motivated to set aside my anxieties / guilt around my ancestry and channel that energy into action with an openness to getting it wrong along the way, if that's how the learning has to happen.*"

- "*The lens with which I view relationships, actions (or inactions) as well as program design has changed greatly. Previously, I would have a more hard line stance centred on (perceived) fair competition, personal drive and achievement as a basis for inclusion. Now, understanding the framework of historical and systematic oppression of many segments of society, I understand that the thought process has to change and why.*"

5.3 Impact on Practitioners

"... if we are to create the space and opportunities for talent to emerge and flourish... we first need to see ourselves in the constructed social systems that have been created, e.g., our cultural behaviours, or processes that restrict potential. We need to make space for other voices, teachers, leaders and ways of being. From there we can identify what we need to change in order for us all to achieve equity. Without it we all miss out and cannot advance on shared social and ecological needs."

(WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

Practitioners

Supporters   **Founders**

WOSEN's practitioner key learnings and reflections were collected primarily through ongoing project and program level discussions, and a reflection survey distributed on February 7, 2022. All the quotes in this section were gleaned from the survey. Themes are organized around Collaboration and Co-creation; Ecosystem Approach; and, Professional Development, echoing their Theory of Change.

WOSEN practitioners concur that centring equity is not an item on a to-do list: it is an active, ongoing process that takes time, deep reflection and a long-term commitment. Dropping in and out of communities that experience ongoing negative impact of colonialism does more harm in the long run. One needs to take time to listen to the community first, to centre the voices most impacted to learn what they need, identify the gaps, and respond to them rather than 'making up' what people might need. When reaching out to connect with equity-seeking founders and/ or learning how to effectively support them, the collaborative considers a respectful approach to be based on **WOSEN Design Principles (p. 12)**, as it also facilitates discovery about oneself as a co-leader and facilitator as a necessary and integral aspect of systems change.

5.3.1 Collaboration and Co-creation

"*It takes more time, but there is considerable value – knowledge and personal growth from the experience*"

WOSEN practitioners underscore that the right partners are needed for collaboration and co-creation to work. They must be open to change; committed to working together; and, be able to communicate effectively. It requires flexibility, a level of trust, and a commitment to working through challenges together. Investing time during project launch to co-create the vision though engaging in emergent practices provides a strong foundation. From the perspective of resources and expertise, these creative processes enable the project to be rich in knowledge and resources. It is also very helpful to have a forward thinking approach to ensure value is created beyond the scope of the project.

"*Both require trust, transparency and a shared intention in order to implement well. Collaboration is about reaching a common goal while still holding close to each individual or organization's agenda or outcomes. Co-creation requires individuals and organizations to build a shared space, with shared power and to focus engagement that serves a shared vision over an individual/organization's needs... It also requires an openness to not being fixed on an outcome at the start, but rather committed to the journey no matter what the outcome.*"

"*I have learned that when there is a common goal and all the partners are committed to achieving that goal, co-creation can bring some amazing results. I have also learned through collaboration, you can collect very rich knowledge and reflection that can improve our work together and our programs.*"

Following are WOSEN practitioner comments elicited from the February 7, 2022 survey that speak more specifically about collaboration, followed by comments directed toward co-creation.

COLLABORATION

- *"Collaboration takes conscious thinking. There is no default approach to fall back. I think our collaboration is made richer when we have a diversity of perspectives and expertise at the table."*

- *"Someone in the collaborative has the knowledge and skills to assist with whatever arises."*

CO-CREATION

- *"My experience is that structure can help to create space... co-creation still requires some baseline structure to invite people to participate in... it's not about prescribing the work from beginning to end, but rather, providing enough scaffolding to then allow for the co-creative process to unfold."*

- *"Adaptability and flexibility are crucial in a co-creation process."*

- *"Co-creation is needed to bring new ideas forward to the table that allows for different perspectives and gets away from industry practices and group thinking that happens."*

- *" ... It often takes a shared experience to generate deep connections between the partners that lead to something meaningful. That is why it is important to spend time in our meetings connecting with one another and discussing what is present for all of us at that moment."*

5.3.2 Ecosystem Approach

"I have gained so much awareness about systems, my placement in those systems and how those systems harm others."
(WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

WOSEN members agree that change is a complex, dynamic process: there are many intersecting systems amplifying the complexity around where and how the power is held, and the barriers to change within power-weidling organizations.

"You can't centre equity with one voice or with one approach or just in one part of the system. It requires a systemic approach to all aspects of work, from whose voices are part of the discussion, the structure and processes and care of the internal team, the unpacking of the multiple levels of a program, which is a complex system with an equity focus from multiple perspectives."

Practitioners have learned that it is important to consider whose voices are missing from within the collaborative and to be open to gathering diverse perspectives to guide their approach as they work towards a common goal. They also are painfully aware that systems transformation takes longer than three years of project funding and consider intentional dialogue regarding the landscape of the entrepreneurship field and collaborating organizations' potential role(s) for example, 20 years from now, very useful in charting the steps that need to be taken now.

"Change is difficult and change is slow. Some may understand your goals immediately and support you, others might take time, and others might walk away entirely."

In addition to the time it takes to build meaningful relationships with organizations, WOSEN practitioners note that some may or may not be willing to adopt an equity lens, and others may be less inclined toward this endeavor due to their structure.

5.3.3 Professional Development

"*The WOSEN experience has been incredibly enriching and healing for me. I've learned to unpack a lot of traumas that I didn't consider as a result of failing systems. The WOSEN learning journey has been very empowering and I feel more confident as I navigate forward, not only in my work with women and communities but also in my personal life outside of work.*" (WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

Embedding Equity

Practitioners have learned equity must be embedded into every level of program design and delivery (i.e., accessibility of content, images, sharing opportunities shared, etc.) to build a world where everyone belongs, is heard and is appreciated. It means making room for everyone by paying particular attention to the speaking balances and imbalances, centring diverse perspectives and ensuring marginalized folks feel comfortable coming to you privately about concerns. It involves fostering an open space for discussion where anything can be addressed, a space where people respond with empathy first instead of in defense. In order for participants to have equity top of mind, it must be modeled by the program facilitators, i.e., they must understand their own positionality within systems and unpack how they show up in their work. They need to have humility and keep learning, adapting and evolving to new knowledge and insights in service of more equitable approaches.

A number of practitioners noted the equity focus has supported them in becoming a better facilitator, changing how they see their work, shifting it from prescriptive programming to collaborative sessions that are fun. They feel that being able to be human-centred and very responsive to individuals' needs is one of the best ways WOSEN has centred equity – as the participants know and feel their voices and experience are valued and included in our conversations at all levels. The following quotes were gleaned from the WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, February. 7, 2022:

- "*How I show up in each relationship and each space that I find myself in is deeply informed by our work on the Design Principles, our collective reflective practice, what I have learned directly working with entrepreneurs, and where I see potential for us to continue shifting systems for the better. I can influence and shape other programs through my input and I take that responsibility seriously.*"

- "*Reciprocity in the Design Principles is important. Responsive to participants, yes, but also responsive to ourselves. Considering how we address barriers that we are upholding in our processes, guidance, approaches, yes, but also being mindful of not removing agency from people and bringing paternalistic approaches, that we are creating environments where participants can show up actively to get what they need out of the work.*"

- "*Listening in a generative way, with an open mind allows me to understand what barriers people have faced, and more importantly, where they hope to be/go. This information is helpful as I work on program design and development because I want to design in a way where people feel valued, safe and empowered.*"

Program design

- "*I've seen so much value in reaching out to women before a program begins to do a needs assessment around what type of support they need… Listening and designing around who we are serving is crucial to providing a positive impact.*"

- "*The design and planning stage of the programs were really great learning opportunities for me to understand and practice EDI. Be an open listener, seek feedback as often as possible, meet people on a personal level rather than only a professional level.*"

- "*Moving through program design and delivery too quickly can mean that we lose this thread.*"

6.0
Conclusions and Next Steps
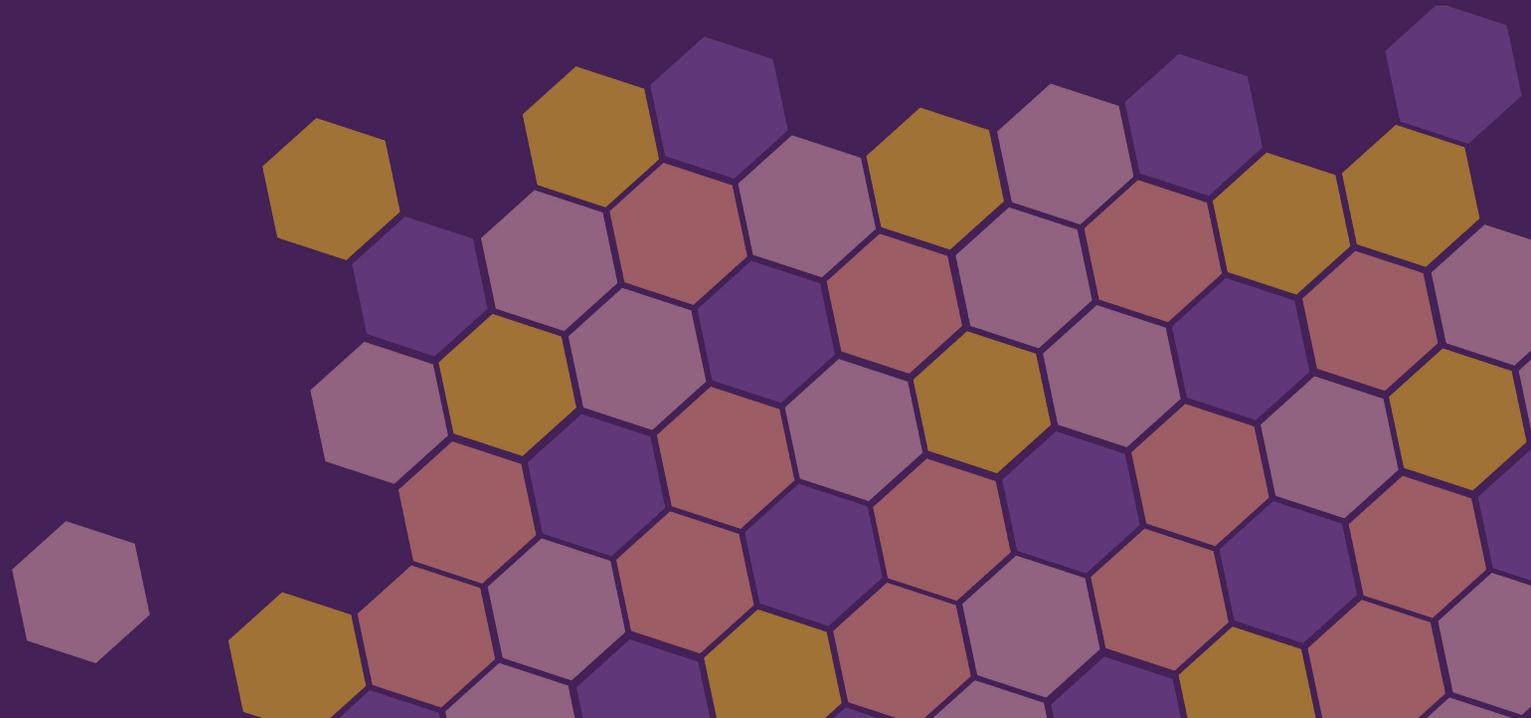
"By reporting on this [systems change] and sharing this knowledge with participants we are able to empower them to learn how to navigate these systems better and gain more sense of confidence. By sharing this knowledge with funders, we have an opportunity to identify barriers and fund additional programs and supports to evolve this work in a changing landscape and hopefully impact policies to serve our target groups better."

(WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

The WOSEN collective impact initiative aims to spark systemic change within the entrepreneurial ecosystem to meet women founders' needs. Their focus is on supporting women from diverse equity-seeking groups who have business solutions that put people and the planet first (i.e., social enterprises) to develop skills that match their potential to flourish, and to connect them with local and/or global communities and resources to succeed.

In undertaking this work the members expressed a desire to deepen relationships, build trust and institute a culture of continuous learning, committing to embarking on an individual and collective journey in learning '*what*' centring equity means and '*how to*' embody and embed it in all aspects of WOSEN (Fenech et al., 2022, p.22). To integrate these threads in collaborating on and implementing this large-scale project, WOSEN developed an innovative theoretical framework that contextualizes the initiative within current recognized systems change field practices and foundational community development principles and methodologies. It embeds emergent collaborative and co-creative processes in creating an 'ecosystem of trust' for continually learning how to centre equity. Specifically, the collaborative's conceptual framework has woven together: i) equity-centred collective impact; ii) principles-focused developmental evaluation; and iii) social impact measurement, designing an intertwined system change assessment framework to evaluate progress at a project and program level, and guide its next steps.

While WOSEN collaborators are aware that systems change takes longer than the three-and-a-half-year duration of this initiative, the data indicate a positive impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystem, upsetting the status quo through fostering new pathways for understanding, and creating effective supports for equity-seeking women, thereby spurring systems change. Data collected through diverse collection methods suggest WOSEN's Equity-Centred Theory of Change appears to be working as portrayed. Their actions are increasing founders', ecosystem supporters' and practitioners' capacity to support entrepreneurial women in meeting their goals. Their equity-focused approaches are creating the infrastructure – the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relational networks and resource flows – to shift value systems and mind models toward more equitable and sustainable business approaches that support the development of women-owned[12] and women-led ventures. Key is committing to equity as the 'guiding light', centring women, operationally and programmatically.

The significant role collaboration and co-creation play in advancing the work cannot be overstated. Intentionally engaging diverse women and ecosystem supporters in participatory, emergent practices in the design and delivery of meaningful and effective supports reveals what founders need and how the project can support them. These dynamic environments facilitate raising awareness, attunement and alignment in understanding women's contexts resulting in program learning environments and investment supports grounded in their specific contexts to meet women's real needs. Findings indicate that embodying and embedding collaboration and co-creation processes as core aspects of WOSEN's collective impact initiative is contributing to transforming it into a cogenerating knowledge network that has been instrumental in individually and collectively building personal, professional and organizational capacity for supporting ecosystem changes necessary for this demographic.

"*The [importance of] shifting from delivering a program to co-creating a responsive design program with participants cannot be overstated.*" (WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

Understanding emerging during this cycle has led to the collaborative's revisiting the four key learnings identified in WOSEN's first report *Outstanding by Standing Together* (**Interim Report**, 2021)[13] reorganizing them into three strategies for catalyzing equity. They are:

Catalyst One: Embody and embed a culture of and embed a culture of collaboration and co-creation
- Ground the work in WOSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, anti-racist and decolonizing framework to build trust and capacity for embedding and embodying collaborative and co-creative processes, transforming transactional relationships into a knowledge cogenerating network.

Catalyst Two: Link and leverage ecosystem resources
- Adopt an ecosystem approach by placing women with lived experience at the centre of inquiry, engaging them and ecosystem supporters in actively understanding their contexts and needs, creating effective supports, and leveraging and reallocating assets to enable founders to flourish.

Catalyst Three: Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions
- Gather robust qualitative and quantitative data through a variety tools, providing an authentic and multi-perspective context for analyzing operation and program effectiveness, and embed iterative processes (i.e., observe, reflect, plan and act) to continuously respond to arising concerns and emerging innovation and evolution.

The fourth key learning noted in the Interim Report regarding reducing the amount of facilitator delivered content, etc. is incorporated into

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12   Women includes ALL women; including those who are Indigenous, in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants or refugees, 2SLGBTQ+, or those with disabilities; All programing is inclusive of Two-Spirit and non-binary/genderqueer individuals.

13   1. Establish a collaborative founded on trust and dedicated to collaboration and co-creation in addressing system change; 2. Ground the work in WOSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, antiracist and decolonizing framework; 3. Adopt a developmental evaluation approach to support ongoing reflection and assessment informing co-creative and responsive design; 4. Reduce the amount of facilitator delivered content, creating opportunities for more discussion, dialogue and relationship building between participants and tailor content to meet smaller group or more individualized needs.

Catalyst Two, Link and leverage ecosystem resources. The methodologies underpinning the creation of effective supports speak to the development of immersive learning environments that are experiential, safe and brave spaces[14] with attention to the amount of content, timing and pacing, incorporating diverse methods and activities to support the entrepreneurial journey from ideation to the development and evolution of their businesses and/or services.

6.1 Next Steps

" *.... systems are upheld by people, so for systems change we need to change the people upholding them - we change people thru relationships, and relationships take time to build, that's why systems change needs time and cannot be rushed.*"
(WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022)

WOSEN members are considering the next steps in advancing this work within the remaining time frame (approximately one year), prioritizing relationships to develop, programming to deliver and future opportunities that would allow the collaborative to continue its collective impact beyond the current scheduled end of the project, as well as deciding on a number of operational aspects in concert with concluding the initiative.

Throughout the initiative an important component of developmental evaluation and reflective practice has been articulating pressing, arising or ongoing questions, encouraging people to be mindful of the importance of what is emerging from undertaking this work and ways inquiry and understanding may be furthered through individual and/or

collective action. Given WOSEN practitioners consider equity to be very grounded in relational work, rooted in each practitioner, extending to

interactions within and beyond the collaborative, they have identified a number of relationships that they would like to build. Data from the February 7, 2022 Practitioner Reflection indicate the following to be most important:

i. Community organizations;

ii. Community-based enterprise development support organizations including government-led (e.g., economic developers and/or tourism development organizations);

iii. Investors, funders, foundations;

iv. Indigenous entrepreneur support organizations; and,

v. Government-mandated enterprise development organizations (e.g., Community Futures Development Organizations, Business Enterprise Centres, Regional Innovation Centres).

In terms of outputs and programming, top of mind is the completion of the *Pollinating Change* knowledge product and the mobilization of outputs through various avenues. The Showcase event (November 2022) is designed to foster connections between and among entrepreneurs, ecosystem supporters to strengthen the networks that have evolved through programming, and expand support to other women founders and business developers who are new to WOSEN's activities. Additionally, collaborative members plan to write a number of focused blogs and disseminate the Story of WOSEN reports through their networks.

Operationally, they are considering how best to acknowledge the collaborative nature underpinning a number of intellectual properties,

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[14]   Arao & Clemens (2013) **From Safe to brave spaces**; Aware-La **https://www.awarela.org/**. **Brave Spaces Guidelines and Communication**

while ensuring members and the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem animators have access to it. The member organizations are also considering post-program access to the dedicated **WOSEN website** and resources, again, to continue supporting equity.

The members acknowledge the demanding, time consuming work involved in undertaking an initiative of this nature, scale and complexity. Fostering trusting, meaningful relationships is a process that follows its own pathway and timeline. The upfront planning, organizational and staff alignment and capacity-building efforts all take dedication and commitment to processes that are emergent, yet lead to actions that are within the boundaries of project-based funding, timelines and deliverables. Maintaining the vision is key. The practitioners expressed being very satisfied with their intention to centre women (and non-binary founders) and their impact to date on advancing equity. They also noted engagement in the initiative to be very positive. They were able to increase their capacity, growing through professional development opportunities as well as the relationships and networks fostered in co-creating the infrastructure necessary for systems change with entrepreneurial ecosystem supporters.

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Appendix 1:

Program Areas and Knowledge Products

The following four key ecosystem gaps were addressed through WOSEN's four innovative, evolving programs, and knowledge products to build ecosystem capacity and influence broader entrepreneurial systems change.

WOMEN IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

(WISE)

WOMEN-CENTRED INNOVATION LEARNING

(WIL)

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPERS

(SEED)

Gap 1: Programs targeted to meet the needs of diverse women

Novel women-focused accelerators supporting women interested in starting or growing a social enterprise by providing access to skill building opportunities, industry coaching and peer learning in a healthy supportive and inclusive entrepreneurial community.

Gap 2: Support for social entrepreneurship which is predominantly composed of women entrepreneurs

Timely, responsive, targeted topics. A powerful educational option to those who may not be ready or able to commit to a longer accelerator program. Connecting siloed networks while building competencies and relationships between entrepreneurial women and development supports.

Gap 3: Access to strategic mentorship and advisory services

A series of modules that allows for dialogue and self-reflection on how to respond to the needs of all social entrepreneurs with an anti-oppressive and systems-informed lens. A Community of Practice provides for continued learning.

INVESTMENT READINESS SUPPORTS

(IRS)

Gap 4: Access to capital

Ambitious and unique programs to access and mobilize available capital, particularly founders needing non-repayable start-up funding ($5K-$60K), aligning capital to the market, and providing early stage founders more opportunities to prototype and test their products and services in order to demonstrate traction and learn.
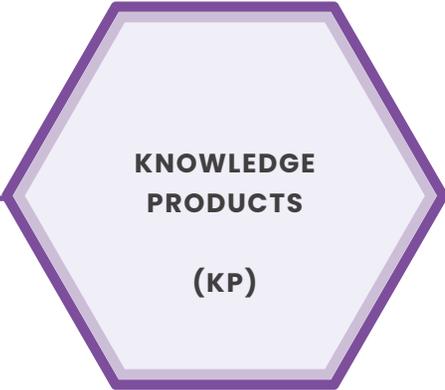
KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS

(KP)

Women-centred knowledge products and resources

An internal project level initiative (rather than a program) dedicated to the creation and distribution of shared learnings and informed practices, contributing to building practitioner capacity, influencing policy and broader entrepreneurial system inequities. This component was added early after the project launched to extend capacity building across the ecosystem.

Appendix 2:

WOSEN Design Principles and Application
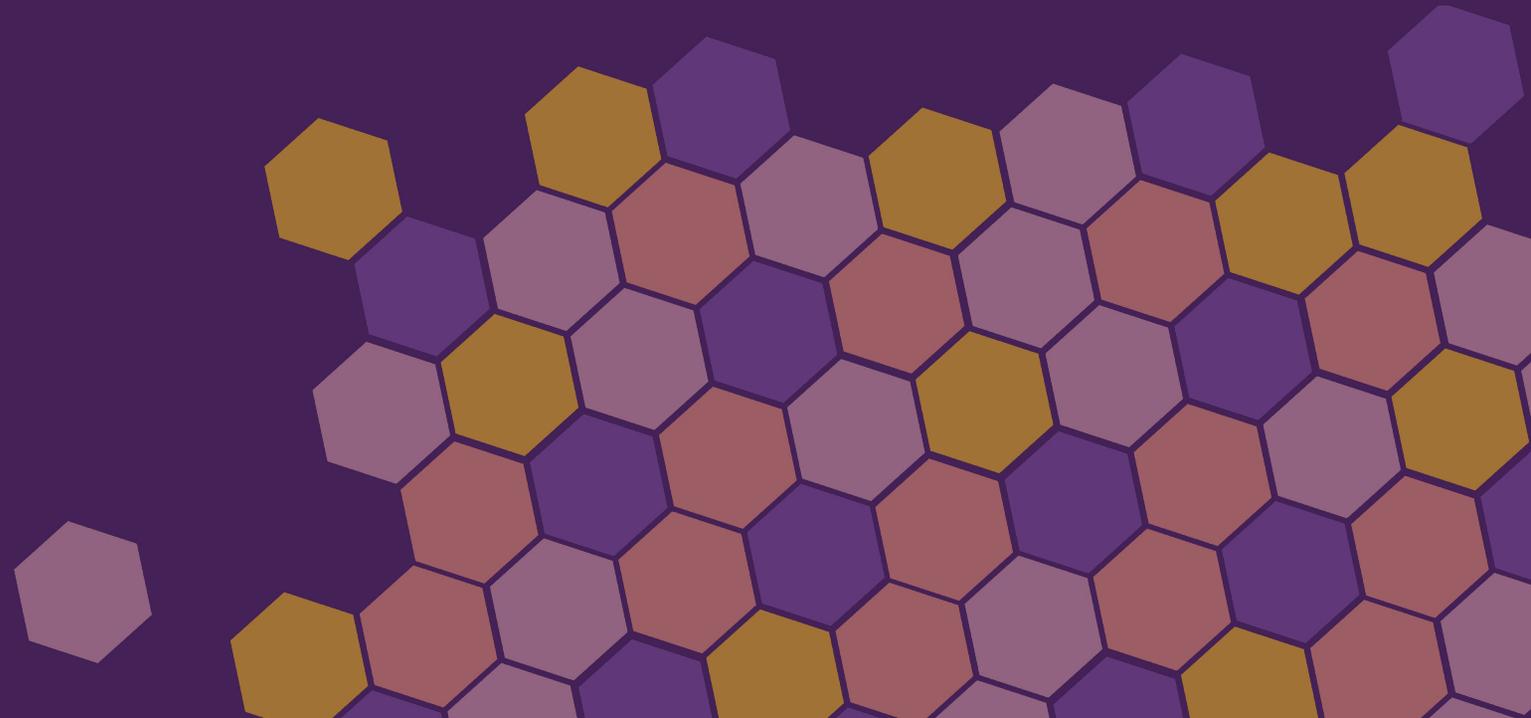
1. Inclusive & Accessible

Do the work required to know your participants. Listen to understand and work to foster an environment of shared meaning and trust, where all participants can feel they belong and have equitable access to opportunities and resources.

a. Ensure all individuals are heard, valued and treated with respect by providing programming that considers lived experience, learning needs, and any physical and cultural barriers to inclusion.

b. Invite participants to bring their whole selves, acknowledging multi-dimensional identities.

c. Consider who is in the program and ensure that the content meets the needs of the participants. For example, summarise regularly, providing another chance for the flow of the discussion to be understood; use visual and auditory supports as often as possible while avoiding information overload; and consider what role hearing, sight and mobility might play in activities and spaces.

d. Take stock of your own positionality and power before each session and consider how it may bias your perspective. Examine the language you use - is it inclusive & accessible, easy to understand and without too much jargon?

e. Provide opportunities and invite participants to share their positionalities and power with the group, tailoring activities to enable them to leverage their power.

"With Northern Ontario being such a large geographic area, virtual sessions and virtual coaching made the program more accessible. Using user-friendly language without 'buzzwords' also contributed to accessibility"
(Elizabeth MacMillan, NORDIK)

2. Decolonized

WOSEN acknowledges that we find ourselves in a colonized system that has oppressed and systemically devalued Indigenous ways, voices, and lives. It aims to create space for multiple realities in programming so that we can build relationships and engage in collective wisdom and knowledge sharing together. Decolonized de-centres where knowledge is held and rethinks how knowledge can be formed.

a. *Decolonized* acknowledges the kinds of enterprises we are talking about are not "new" (social enterprises or community-driven businesses), rather Indigenous peoples have been doing this work for centuries. Similarly, innovation does not only refer to technological innovation, but also old knowledge and principles which seek to be made new again through any form of solution development.

b. Invite and value other ways of knowing,

c. Speak to colonization, e.g., How might colonization be responsible for this state of affairs or perspective?

d. Give credit if using aspects of another's culture and use in harmony with that culture's intention.

e. Normalize that it is ok for anyone to speak up about present or historical harm or discomfort, and build community muscles of treating this feedback as a gift rather than meeting it with pushback and silencing.

3. Anti-Oppressive

Anti-oppressive practice seeks to recognize the oppressions that exist in society and attempt to mitigate their effects and eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities. Practicing anti-oppression work in real terms is not only confronting individual examples of bigotry, or confronting societal examples, it is also confronting ourselves and our own roles of power and oppression in our communities and the bigger picture.

a. Consider co-creating a community agreement and guidelines so you have transparent protocols in place.

b. Explore your patterns of flight, fight, freeze, appease when it comes to feedback and confrontation. Build the muscles of being able to respond to feedback rather than reacting and shutting it down so that you can model taking corrective feedback from people experiencing oppression.

c. Balance between holding someone accountable for an offensive or ignorant statement and still engaging them in the conversation. If you have the emotional bandwidth, use it as a teachable moment to allow further entry into the conversation.

d. When discomfort, harm or other issues arise, ask the group for suggestions on how to deal with these situations in the future.

e. Normalize at the start of a group's time together the difference between intention and impact and ask people to commit to taking responsibility for impact.

4. Systems-Informed

WOSEN aims to integrate systems thinking, taking the time to step back and examine the larger cultural and historical contexts in which we find ourselves. We believe that through understanding systems we can enable ourselves to change them by unpacking systemic barriers, e.g., being aware, actively informed and inviting global conversations and differing perspectives. Systems-informed means to work to acknowledge and understand the links between elements that make up a system, including your place within the system. While discussion is invited, it is not a place for political lobbying but for empathizing, learning, and growing.

a. Zoom out: take a step back from a conversation and see the larger context in which an issue is taking place.

b. Leverage the diverse lived-experiences of the group.

c. Use activities that invite the participants to hear and see each other's work.

d. Notice when people use either/or and try to simplify complex issues, slow it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis.

e. When faced with an urgent decision, take a break to think creatively and avoid making decisions under extreme pressure.

5. Responsive

WOSEN acknowledges unique cultural attributes and elements, creating space for participants to request culturally appropriate support they need. Responsive practice means centring the needs and identities of the participant and changing directions as needed to move in the direction that they need.

a. While being present for others, you practice self-care to ensure that WOSEN may continue to provide the same quality of support over time and to protect yourself from giving more than is in your cup to give.

b. In being responsive, you create opportunities to calm, stretch and carve space for empathy and empathizing individually and together. You aim to understand the emotional needs of women entrepreneurs and pace learning at the speed of trust.

c. Avoid responding to someone who is triggered as a problem within your session. A triggered person is letting you know they don't feel safe. Interpret them as asking for help and connection. Say "It's ok to feel afraid, but you're not in any danger. You're here with me right now."

d. Stay nimble and know your go-to moves - Being present and mindful of go-to moves when encountering specific situations, moving slowly, and creating space for silence can all help a facilitator to determine the best course of action in any given moment.

e. Work for balance between process and content, but give precedence to process over content when you have to choose.

"The team designed sessions as we went through the program to stay flexible to the needs of the group." (Maureen Strickland, NORDIK)

6. Ecosystem-Approach

WOSEN does not plug into patriarchal systems or adopt patriarchal norms such as being overly competitive and exclusive. An ecosystem-approach showcases the value of partnership and collaboration, helping entrepreneurs learn how to partner well, and be active personal and systems mappers and designers. Collaborators are invited into WOSEN networks and practice inclusion for the purpose of collective impact as well as for the purpose of social justice.

a. Foster the idea that success is shared.

b. Promote give and take: The ecosystem-approach invites us to share success, raise our collaborators and allies up, but it also invites us to ask for what we need. Asking for help or support is not perceived as weakness or as "begging". Give and take are equal activities in the eyes of the ecosystem.

c. Plan for moments of teamwork and cooperative activities considering how the participants within the session may be able to help one another.

d. Create a culture where people can bring problems to the group to solve, not just to report activities.

e. Invite participants to connect with one another on social media and other platforms or in other places where they may be able to see each other's networks, make introductions, and support each other.

Historically, and in the context of the patriarchal economic systems, women have not always had the space to leverage their capacities, values, or ways of working. WOSEN practices human-centreedness to create these missing opportunities to calm, stretch and carve space for empathy and being as we are. Understanding the emotional needs of women entrepreneurs and not treating emotions as misplaced in the context of work or innovation is crucial.

a. Pace learning at the speed of trust and do not force strategies, opinions, or the best practices of the patriarchy on one another. Instead, favor being trauma informed and building authentic relationships with one another. WOSEN programs are not "therapy sessions" places where social, societal or institutional forms of harm or oppression can take place. That said, do not accept non-feasible ideas no matter how comforting they may be. WOSEN programs aim to enable participants' real progress and action.

b. Make room for women's ways of being and doing - invite everyone to come as they are and protect the shared spaces from assumptions about how one "can" or "should" do business, advocacy work, or social innovation based on societal norms.

c. Create a safe space for expression - enable participants to both heal and thrive by creating a space to share their experiences and challenges but also their values, hopes, and dreams for the future.

d. Get in the mindset of speaking for and on behalf of yourself and only yourself.

e. Follow up with participants and continue the relationship.

"By integrating the Design Principles such as Human-Centreed and Responsive, we feel we developed a deeper connection with the entrepreneurs." (SVX)