

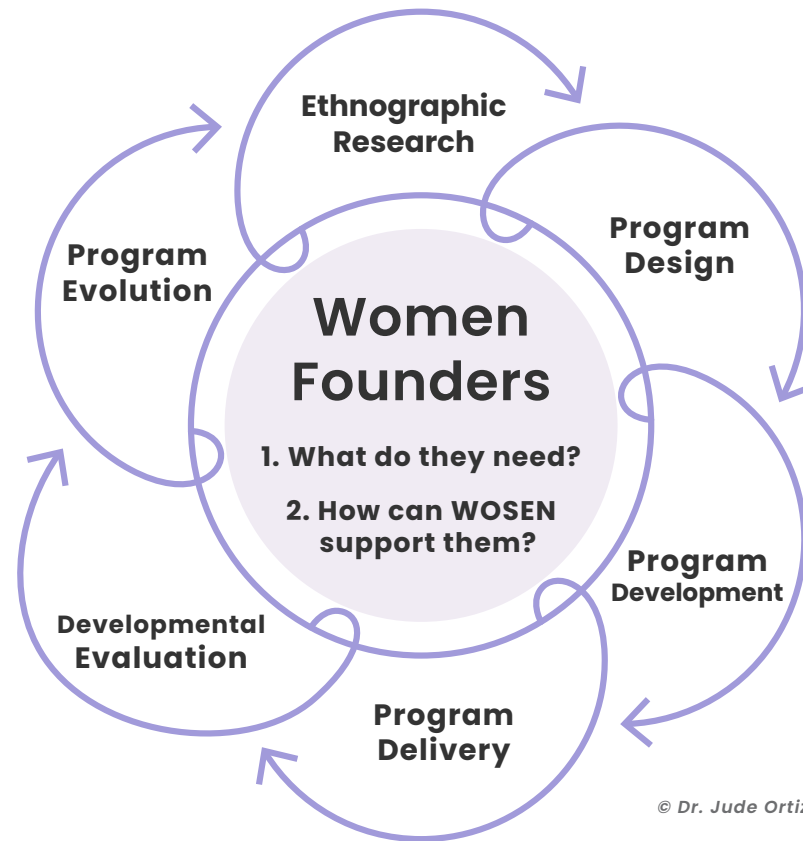
# Investing in Women Entrepreneurs:

A case study for co-creating effective supports

## Final Report

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

Dr. Jude Ortiz, NORDIK Institute  
March 2023



© Dr. Jude Ortiz, NORDIK Institute (2023)

*Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people.*

# Acknowledgments

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



**Pillar Nonprofit Network** strengthens individuals, organizations and enterprises invested in positive community impact. We support nonprofits, social enterprises and social innovators by sharing resources, exchanging knowledge and creating meaningful connections across the three pillars of nonprofit, business and government. We believe that a connected network sparks collaboration and a willingness to lean on each other to help build an engaged, inclusive and vibrant community. WOSEN staff: Rachel Berdan, Charles Blazevic, Eaman Fahmy, Kaleigh Rodgers, Caitlin Villeneuve, Mariam Waliji.



**Flourishing Startups** works with members of the entrepreneurship ecosystem who seek to encourage entrepreneurial practice to realize key public policy goals and the Sustainable Development goals. FS supports the co-creation of social and environmental impact centred entrepreneurship programming. FS is female-led. WOSEN staff: Ondine Hogeboom, Ellen Martin and Sarah Naylor.



Pillar Nonprofit Network is a proud recipient of support from the Government of Canada through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario ([FedDev Ontario](#)).

FedDev Ontario works to advance and diversify the southern Ontario economy through funding opportunities and business services that support innovation and growth in Canada's most populous region. The Agency has delivered impressive results, which can be seen in southern Ontario businesses that are creating innovative technologies, improving their productivity, growing their revenues, and in the economic advancement of communities across the region.

Pillar Nonprofit Network applauds all of the participants who bravely showed up to participate in WOSEN programming and who are building incredible impact driven businesses. We thank all of the coaches, facilitators, mentors and experts who worked to challenge their own beliefs about women-centred businesses and provided valuable support to the whole community.

*This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the funder, member organizations of the WOSEN Collaborative or delivery partners.*

*Intellectual property created through the Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN) project (2019-2023) is collectively owned by its partners. WOSEN is a collaborative partnership between Pillar Nonprofit Network, Centre for Social Innovation, Social Innovation Canada, NORDIK Institute and Social Venture Connexion, and Flourishing Startups.*



**Social Innovation Canada** (SI Canada) is an emerging pan-Canadian initiative to connect social innovation practitioners, build the capacity of our sector, and elevate this work in Canada and beyond.



**The Centre for Social Innovation** (CSI) catalyzes, inspires and supports people to create, develop, adopt and integrate new and renewed concepts and practices that put people and planet first. We envision a world where our systems – economy, government, culture and communities – serve to create a healthy, just, resilient & regenerative society full of meaning, equity & happiness.



**NORDIK Institute** (Northern Ontario Research, Development, Ideas and Knowledge) is an innovative community-based research hub affiliated with Algoma University dedicated to building healthy, resilient communities by building capacity to achieve cultural, social, economic and environmental justice. It has established strong links with other research institutes, universities, and colleges. WOSEN staff: Dr. Jude Ortiz, Maureen Strickland, Krista Bissiallon, Diaymn Lauzon, Elizabeth MacMillan, and Tamara Gagnon.



**Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship** (SEE) is an initiative lead by NORDIK Institute to support, grow and scale social enterprises across the region by building ecosystem capacity.



**Social Venture Connexion** (SVX) is a non-profit financial services firm that designs strategies, manages funds, and mobilizes capital for social purpose organizations and investors. We work across sectors that deliver meaningful social impact to society, including cleantech, health, education, food, and social inclusion. SVX has operations across Canada, the United States, Mexico and Colombia. WOSEN staff: Helen Zhou, Nashwa Shakeel, Paula Sahyoun.

To cite this report: Ortiz, J. (2023). [Investing in Women: A case study for co-creating effective supports](#). The Story of the Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN), Final Report. Sault Ste. Marie, ON: NORDIK Institute.

# Table of Contents

<a href="#"><u>1.0 WOSEN Project Overview .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>1</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2.0 Three Catalyzing Strategies for Co-creating Effective Supports ..</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>6</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2.1 Catalyst One:</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Embody and embed a culture of collaboration and co-creation ..</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>7</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Intention, Relationships and Trust.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>7</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Practice Framework: An Equity-Centered Cogenerating</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Knowledge Network .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>8</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Collaborative Learning Journey.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>9</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2.2 Catalyst Two:</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Link and leverage ecosystem resources .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>10</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Diverse Ecosystem Engagement.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>10</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Co-creating Effective Programs.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>11</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Program Design, Development and Delivery</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>11</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Program Development and Evolution Cycle</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>12</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Effective Program Delivery:</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Authentic Learning Environments</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>13</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Knowledge Products and Mobilization .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>13</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2.3 Catalyst Three:</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>14</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Data Collection, Analysis and Reflection.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>14</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>3.0 Ten Recommendations for Strengthening Investment</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>in Co-creating Effective Supports .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>15</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Catalyst One: Embody and Embed a Culture</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>of Collaboration and Co-creation .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>16</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>1. Equity-Centred Collaboratives.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>16</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2. Project Application and Timelines .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>17</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Catalyst Two: Link and Leverage Ecosystem Resources .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>18</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>3. Leveraging Ecosystem Relationships.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>18</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>4. Ecosystem Supporter Programs .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>18</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>5. Decolonized or Equitable Program Design,</u></a>	
<a href="#"><u>Development and Delivery.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>18</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>6. Knowledge Products and Mobilization .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>19</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>7. Project Duration.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>19</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>8. Project Diversity and Flexibility .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>9. Access to Capital.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Catalyst Three: Gather Meaningful Data for Targeted Solutions ...</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>10. Data, Evaluation and Accountability .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>4.0 Conclusions .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>22</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>References.....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>25</u></a>

## FIGURES

<a href="#"><u>1. Engagement and Unlocked Capital .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>4</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2. Theory of Change: Interconnected Catalyzing Strategies ...</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>5</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>3. WOSEN Design Principles .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>8</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>4. Ecosystem Engagement and Contribution .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>11</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>5. Program Development and Evolution Cycle .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>12</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>6. Pollinating Change Game .....</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>13</u></a>





# 1.0 WOSEN Project Overview

*“Our government believes that women’s economic empowerment is not just the right thing to do; it’s good for the bottom line. That’s why we launched the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy... It’s a smart investment with an economic and social return.”<sup>1</sup>*

*– Mary Ng, Canada’s Minister of Small Business and Export Promotion*

The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) is one of a number of initiatives funded through the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES). Their recent report, *The State of Women’s Entrepreneurship in Canada* (Cukier, Mo, Chavoushi, Borova, & Osten 2022) explains:

*“... many of the organizations supported by the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy provided services and supports tailored to the needs of women entrepreneurs and saw strong returns on these investments. At the same time, overall, incubators and accelerators and many of the available support programs do not meet the needs of women entrepreneurs nor the needs of diverse women in particular. More research is needed to determine what works for whom and to address existing barriers” (p. vii).*

In contrast to organizations dedicated to supporting women and other groups, such as Black or Indigenous entrepreneurs, the researchers note, many “mainstream” incubators and accelerators and business organizations are now targeting equity-seeking groups; however, “...very few have done the hard work to overcome systemic barriers baked into their policies and processes.” (p.70).

<sup>1</sup> [Feds invest \\$4.2 million to support female-led businesses across region](#), London CTV News, (Aug, 9, 2019)

Cuiker et al. (2022) acknowledge that change takes time, recommending organizations could begin with:

- Providing services to entrepreneurs in support of more explicit commitments to gender parity and diversity;
- Sharing good practices for creating inclusive support services and recognizing the need for women-centred design and delivery of programs;
- Providing women-friendly wraparound services and supports: flexible hours, access to child care, personal coaching and mentoring, mental health and trauma-informed approaches are among the services and supports identified as important; and,
- Designing programs to meet the unique needs of diverse women, including, for example, Indigenous women, newcomer women, racialized women, women with disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and more (p.70).

The Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSEN) acknowledges WES’s important investment in women with business aspirations. As a proud recipient of WES funding, the contribution has enabled WOSEN to address the above noted systemic barriers by intentionally redesigning the entrepreneurial ecosystem’s approach to meet the needs of women founders while simultaneously supporting organizations in ‘doing the hard work’ of centring equity.

WOSEN provides the sector with evidence-informed processes on ‘how to’ develop an equity-centric social entrepreneurship ecosystem. The initiative is contextualized within systems change and community economic development principles, providing a critical analysis of effective means for building, enhancing and expanding equity, and ‘how well’ strategies work — the impact and responses in addressing systemic barriers diverse women entrepreneurs encounter.

The work reveals the significant role collaborative and co-creative<sup>2</sup> processes contribute to building trust, shifting mindsets and identifying innovative equity-centred pathways forward. It illustrates 'how to':

1. Collaborate to surface what women founders need to participate and prosper in business;
2. Build an ecosystem of trust to co-create effective equity-centred programing;
3. Assess the progress and impact of this work; and,
4. Increase the effectiveness of investment in women's entrepreneurship.

As such, the WOSN partners consider their collaborative and responsive approach a case study of a successful model for investing in women and creating the entrepreneurial infrastructure for them to prosper. They suggest that this model could be scaled to support others in advancing equity by building new paradigm capacity such as co-leadership, co-creation and emergent, reflective and participatory practices in developing resources, networks and pathways forward.

The Women of Ontario Social Enterprise Network (WOSN) was a province-wide collaborative composed of five social innovation and system change organizations led by [Pillar Nonprofit Network](#) in partnership with [Social Innovation Canada](#) (SI Canada), [Social Venture Connexion](#) (SVX), [NORDIK Institute](#) (NORDIK) and [Flourishing Startups](#) (FS). They collectively delivered the WOSN initiative from 2019-2023.

The collaborative focused on women entrepreneurs from across Ontario and sectors 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. WOSN programs specifically focused on women who were Indigenous, living in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants and/or those living with disabilities. Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people. The terms "founders" and "entrepreneur" includes women who own or operate a small-medium sized business (SME) and those who are self-employed.

WOSN launched its first program in early 2020, and over the course of the project, it almost tripled its deliverable impact, engaging more than 1175 participants from over 142 different rural, urban and First Nation communities across Ontario, and assisted in unlocking \$8.842 million for women founders.

At the outset, WOSN committed to:

- Investing in women entrepreneurs by centring equity as their north star<sup>3</sup>; and,
- Building ecosystem capacity to collaborate and co-create effective and equitable entrepreneurial supports.

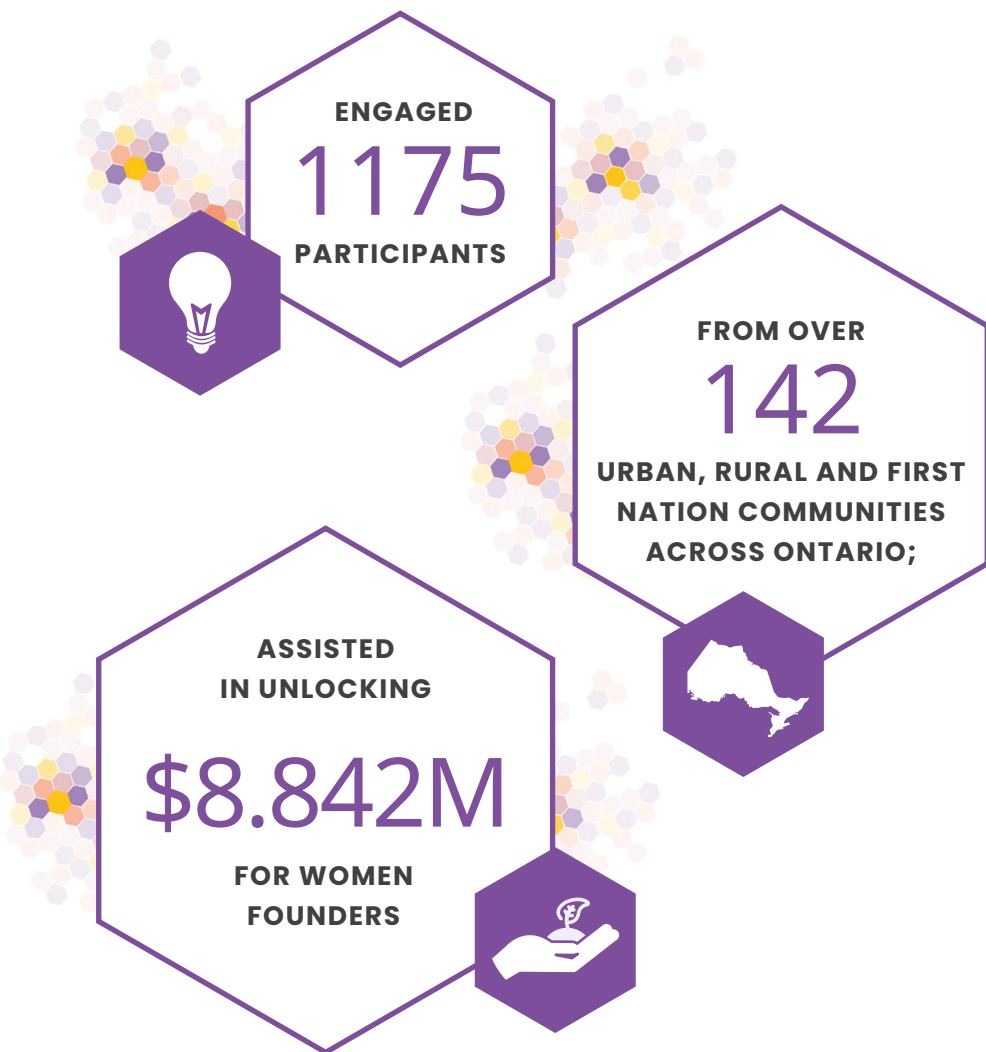
The WOSN methodology places women entrepreneurs and their needs at the centre of the conversation in understanding their context and barriers, and intentionally engages diverse founders and ecosystem supporters in cycles of dynamic processes of collaboration and co-creation to design, deliver and evolve programs to meet founders' needs. Ecosystem supporters include business development individuals and organizations, coaches/mentors, and investors/funders.

<sup>2</sup> **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

<sup>3</sup> Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022). [Centering Equity in Collective Impact](#).



Figure 1: Engagement and Unlocked Capital



WOSN's approach intentionally moves away from current services and financing structures that are readily available and easy to deliver largely due to their limited relevance and accessibility for those that fall outside of the dominant culture, choosing instead to develop a model that holistically supports diverse entrepreneurs' learning journeys and aspirations. By fostering the mindsets, skills, practices, relationships and policies that support the creation of effective, equitable services, they aimed to shift the conditions that hold systemic barriers in place, leading to the development of inclusive people, places and economies. This methodology has helped hundreds of women entrepreneurs across Ontario to start and grow their businesses and has unlocked millions of dollars in capital for these initiatives.

WOSN members saw the call for investing in equitable supports as a commitment to centring women and the impetus for embarking on an individual and collective learning journey.

WOSN's inquiry focused on the foundational questions:

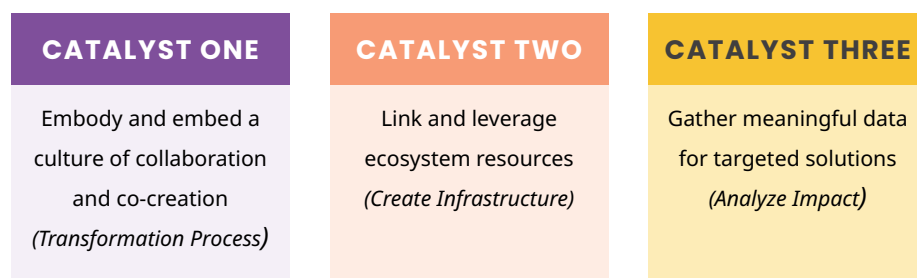
1. What do women founders need to participate and prosper in business?
2. How can WOSN support them?



Their Theory of Change identifies three catalyzing strategies that underpin how the collaborative developed an ecosystem of trusting relationships to co-create effective supports, and influence and direct investment toward supporting women entrepreneurs, thereby developing a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

- 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 2: Theory of Change: Interconnected Catalyzing Strategies**



The Story of WOSEN is the collective's evidence-informed learning journey, revealing 'how to' processes and capturing their critical reflection of its impact on creating a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. It is documented and shared through three reports:

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 is seen as an innovative, effective and an impactful approach to addressing systems change.

Part Two, [Centring Equity: Catalyzing system change through a collaborative, cogenerating knowledge network](#) (Oct. 2022), 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. It contributes to: i) understanding how community-based research methodology can contribute to building, enhancing, and expanding equity; and, ii) how to develop an equity-centric social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Part Three, [Investing in Women Entrepreneurs: A Case Study for co-creating effective supports](#), (this report), provides an overview of the key elements of each of the three catalyzing strategies for co-creating effective supports for diverse women entrepreneurs. It is followed by ten recommendations for increasing investments in women founders through equity-centred collaboratives, partnerships and advocacy, and program diversity, flexibility and duration, to name a few.





# 2.0

## Three Catalyzing Strategies for Co-creating Effective Supports

This section provides an overview of the three interconnected catalyzing strategies that underpin how the collaborative developed an ecosystem of trusting relationships to influence and direct investment toward supporting women<sup>4</sup> entrepreneurs, thereby fostering a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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

*Ground the work in WOSSEN Design Principles, an inclusive, anti-oppressive 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.*

<sup>4</sup> WOSSEN programs specifically focused on women who were Indigenous, living in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants and/or those living with disabilities. Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people.

## Intention, relationships and trust

The WOSSEN partners (Pillar, SI Canada, SVX, NORDIK and FS) did not simply want a coordinated partnership to deliver educational programming, but rather, intentionally collaborate operationally and programmatically to address systemic barriers women experience within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

At the outset, WOSSEN committed to:

- Investing in women entrepreneurs by centring equity as their north star<sup>5</sup>; and,
- Building ecosystem capacity to collaborate and co-create effective and equitable entrepreneurial supports.

Intentionally focusing on people, the human side, and embedding and embodying a culture of collaboration and co-creation in all aspects of the project fosters an ecosystem of trust. Respectful relationships between and among the collaborative members, founders, ecosystem supporters and community partners shifts transactional relationships to transformational ones, creating pathways, linkages, and networks that support systemic change toward more equitable and inclusive people, places and economies.

WOSSEN partners understand trust to be value-based and relational, beginning with oneself and extending outwards to others.

*“Relationships are always the starting point and they’re what can create real change. If we work to be more relational and less transactional, we learn more about and from each other, we support each other, genuinely care for each other and can see the humanity in one another.”*

### – WOSSEN Practitioner Final Reflection, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Kania, Williams, Schmitz, Brady, Kramer, & Splansky Juster (2022). [Centering Equity in Collective Impact](#).

## Practice Framework: An equity-centred cogenerating knowledge network

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; co-creating foundational design principles; and conceptualizing a framework that would integrate these threads in collaborating on and implementing this large-scale project. An innovative model evolved from the initial work – an equity centred, cogenerating knowledge network – transforming the partnership into a supportive capacity-building initiative for the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Specifically, the collaborative's model weaves together recognized system change field practices and foundational community development principles and methodologies:

- i. equity centred collective impact embedded in emergent collaborative and co-creation processes for the emergence of collective wisdom, social justice and social innovation;
- ii. principles-focused developmental evaluation, grounded in community development principles within iterative cycles of reflection (observe, reflect, plan and act/implement) and guided by WOSEN Design Principles; and
- iii. social impact measurement, an intertwined system change assessment framework to evaluate progress at a project and program level, and guide its next steps.

The foundational community development principles are:

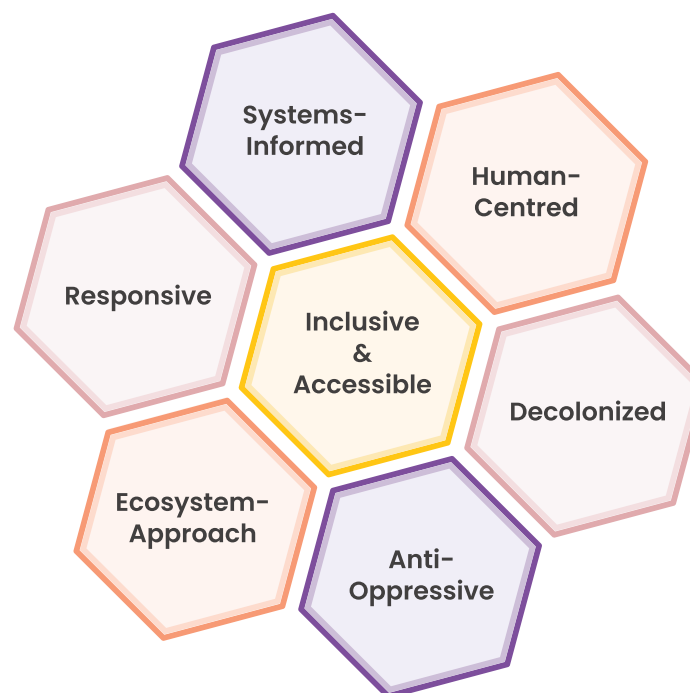
- i. Meet people where they are at;

- ii. Value people for who they are; and

- iii. Engage people in learning together, learning by doing.

The WOSEN's Design Principles that guided the collaborative is an inclusive, anti-oppressive and 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 provided the '*how to*', the foundation, for intentional interaction, trust and relationship building. 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.

*Figure 3: WOSEN Design Principles*



For more information about the WOSEN Design Principles and practice framework please refer to the [Centring Equity Report](#), Section 2.0: Designing An Equity-Centred, Cogenerating Knowledge Network, as well as Pillar's blog post, [WOSEN's Design Principles: Moving beyond checkboxes to create systems change](#).

## Collaborative Learning journey

WOSEN members 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 inner influences that drive outer actions (Senge, Hamilton and Kania, 2016).

To surface current entrepreneurial system blockages and create innovative pathways forward, the collective identified the following foundational questions:

1. What do women founders need to participate and prosper in business?
2. How can WOSEN support them?

Nested inquiry included:

- What infrastructure needed to be developed?
- What knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, relationships, networks and resources are needed to make this happen?

# Women Founders

**1. What do they need?**

**2. How can WOSEN support them?**

*Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people.*

### Collective goals aimed 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 women founders and ecosystem supporters in emergent collaborative and co-creative practices to understand their contexts, and build capacity 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.



## 2.2 Catalyst Two: Link and leverage ecosystem resources

*Adopt an ecosystem approach by placing diverse 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.*

WOSEN practitioners posit that investing in diverse women entrepreneurs by 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. Short-term interventions place delivery organizations in challenging positions, often doing more harm than good in the long run by dropping in and out of communities that continue to experience the negative impact of colonialism. Time is needed to listen to the community first, centre the voices most impacted to learn what they need, identify the gaps, and respond to them.

*"We need to create the space and time required to build meaningful engagements with collaborating partners and with those we are serving. There are some things that just cannot be sped up or be co-created without enough time. Time is such a precious resource in a world where success is measured on how to do things faster, more efficiently with less resources ... [it] destroys the potential for things emerging that can reshape our stories."*

**- WOSN Practitioner Final Reflection, 2023**

### Diverse ecosystem engagement

*"Engaging in reflection and cultural humility... means mov[ing] away from the colonial idea that we can learn everything about a culture and ultimately reduce it to a checkbox. This is what cultural competence represents. Cultural humility is recognizing we are always learning and this is what we need to embrace."*

**- WOSN Practitioner Final Reflection, 2023**

WOSEN committed to listening to and acting with the entrepreneurial community, reaching intended groups who may be not be easily accessible and/or visible through mainstream channels, and intentionally engaging them and diverse ecosystem supporters to build 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 founders at the core, the central focus, and the ways the various supporters and practitioners contributed to advancing equity.

Figure 4: Ecosystem Engagement and Contribution



*Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people.*

## Co-creating effective programs

*“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.”*

– WOSEN Practitioner Reflection, Feb. 2022

### PROGRAM DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

WOSEN's program methodology bridges relationships and builds trust and linkages between and among those seeking investment supports and those providing them. It 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. It moves away from current entrepreneurial supports and financing structures that are readily available and easy to deliver largely due to their limited relevance and accessibility for those that fall outside of the dominant culture, choosing instead to develop a model that holistically supports the entrepreneur's learning journey and aspirations.



Program development intentionally focuses on creating safe and brave spaces<sup>6</sup> to unpack the various influences that drive outer actions, and facilitate collaboration and co-creation in the development of effective and inclusive supports. Emergent processes surface orthodoxies and blockages that hinder developing more equitable and just economies, raising awareness of the various perspectives underpinning the dominant narrative and the complex roles and relationships that hold it in place. The interaction fosters the development of a supportive equity-centred cogenerating knowledge network for the entrepreneurial ecosystem, building agency, will and pathways to re/direct investment toward developing effective supports for women founders.

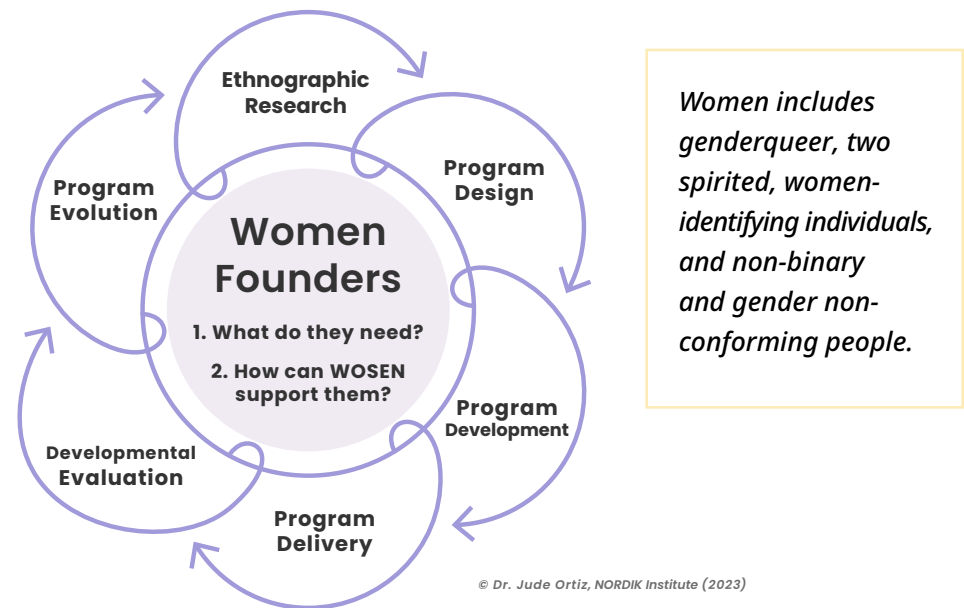
## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION CYCLE

To inform program development the WOSEN collaborative undertook the following process:

1. **Ethnographic research:** with those with lived experiences similar to the women being served by WOSEN (i.e., women with business aspirations and existing founders) becomes the basis for development of each program. Organizational knowledge and literature also contribute to understanding context, existing resources and gaps.
2. **Program Design:** Based on ethnographic research that surfaces 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. **Program Development:** Draws on WOSEN members' respective entrepreneurial ecosystem relationships, gathering community collaborators, business developers, mentors, guest speakers and investors to support programs.

4. **Program Delivery:** WOSEN practitioners in collaboration with community organizations, guest speakers/facilitators; coaches.
5. **Developmental Evaluation:** Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data regarding learnings and impact, nested in the transformational cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action/implementation. The redesign, iteration or evolution occurs in real time during multi-sessions programs or at the end of the program in preparation for the next delivery cycle.
6. **Program Evolution:** Includes responsive design during delivery in real time; integrating learnings and emergent understanding at end of program; adjustments to meet program objectives and deliverables.

Figure 5: Program Development and Evolution Cycle



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

## EFFECTIVE PROGRAM DELIVERY: AUTHENTIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In contrast to many educational training programs that focus on transferring knowledge to founders, WOSEN's methodology transforms program delivery into a shared learning journey, encouraging founders to articulate needs in real time, and building facilitators' capacity of being aware of, and understanding how, to incorporate founders' needs into future plans (Fenech, Jaimes, Rutsch, Schoen & Muehlenbein, 2022, p.22).

Continuous active engagement and ongoing communication between and among facilitators, guest speakers, coaches and participants builds relationships, fostering deepening understanding of the issues around equality and women entrepreneurship, allowing questions to arise, provide timely responses, surface needed supports and innovative solutions, contributing to the development of effective resources, new networks and investment opportunities.

WOSEN programs intentionally created 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. They 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 type of delivery format validates participants' tacit knowledge and supports surfacing different conversations to spur self-learning, individual developmental shifts and relationship building that underpin healthy, resilient founders.

Facilitators engage participants in a variety of forms of intelligence and learning styles, introducing them to entrepreneurs, thereby encouraging founders to integrate these processes into their operations. Thus, programs 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.

## Knowledge Products and Mobilization

Knowledge products serve as project legacies, capturing and sharing significant learnings and acknowledging the dedication and participation of individuals, organizations and funding agencies. They contribute to advancing field capacity by retaining knowledge and influencing policy and broader entrepreneurial system inequities. Knowledge products include blogs; case studies; reports; [spoken word artistic pieces](#), and media hits. A summary of such products is provided in [Outstanding By Standing Together, Interim Report](#), Section 3.4 Building awareness and ecosystem capacity (p.50).

As with WOSEN's program development methodology, the collaborative engaged ecosystem supporters in co-learning how to consolidate and translate collectively generated knowledge into products to share with others. Pollinating Change: Design Principles for a Better World is one example of the collaborative's goal of facilitating reimagining the entrepreneurial ecosystem toward supporting equity-seeking communities beyond the life of the project. It is a process and dialogue-based game exploring ways [WOSEN Design Principles](#), an inclusive, anti-oppressive and decolonizing framework can be applied.

Figure 6: Pollinating Change Game



To read about the WOSEN project's impact on participants, ecosystem supporters and WOSEN practitioners please see the [Centring Equity Report](#), Section 5.0 Ecosystem Impact and the [Outstanding By Standing Together, Interim Report](#), Section 3.3 Learnings and Impact.



## 2.3 Catalyst Three: Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions

*Gather robust qualitative and quantitative data through a variety of 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.*

### **Data collection, analysis and reflection**

WOSEN's work was grounded in data, contextualized within entrepreneurial ecosystems and broader social change movements. The collaborative considers the embedded Developmental Evaluation (DE) process to be a significant contributor to generating rapid learning in navigating complex, dynamic systems. It supports informed and timely decision-making and building practitioner capacity to articulate the relationship between goals, assessment and actions that inform and guide project and program discussions and strategic decisions as the project unfolds.

WOSEN's DE is principles-focused, considering not only 'what' is being done (e.g., programs delivered), but 'how' the work is being undertaken. It is rooted in values about what matters and based on evidence about how to be effective. It 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. The DE process 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.

Diverse sources and ongoing 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 WOSN reports.



3.0

# Ten Recommendations for Strengthening Investment in Co-Creating Effective Supports



# Catalyst One – Embody and embed a culture of collaboration and co-creation

## 1. Equity-centred Collaboratives

### COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

To establish an effective equity-centred collaborative:

- Find the right partners:
  - those who share similar values and goals, and are able to commit to engaging and supporting each other in individual and collective learning;
  - have connections and/or links to those with lived experience;
- Invest time during the launch phase to develop:
  - a shared understanding of the scope of the project and its goals; co-created design principles; and, processes for engaging diverse entrepreneurs and ecosystem supporters in collaboration
  - an equity-centred practice framework:
    - Embedding and embodying a culture of collaboration and co-creation, operationally and programmatically, providing opportunities for co-leadership and facilitation;

WOSEN is a proud recipient of funding from the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) through FedDev, and acknowledges the important investment the federal government has made to women's economic empowerment. Strategically positioned between government, philanthropic agencies and/or investors and entrepreneurs, the collaborative may be considered an information and knowledge conduit sharing insights between investors and those they wish to serve.

Based on the collaborating organizations' extensive field experience, ongoing dialogues and robust data collected over the three-and-a-half-year initiative, the WOSSEN partners have, respectfully, identified a number of equity-centred approaches and anti-oppressive and decolonizing funding principles that would increase the effectiveness of investments in entrepreneurial supports. The recommendations are organized around WOSSEN's three strategies for catalyzing systemic change in the women's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

While the following recommendations emerged from the initiative, a number of them are echoed in current literature including: *The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada* (Cuiker et al., 2022); *Being the Change: 12 Ways Foundations Are Transforming Themselves to Transform Their Impact* (Stevenson, Bockstette, Seneviratne, Cain & Foster, 2018); and, *Five principles to get long-term, flexible funding into the hands of community-led organizations* (French, 2022).





- Principles-focused developmental evaluation, grounded in community development principles within iterative cycles of reflection (observe, reflect, plan and act/implement) and guided by an inclusive, anti-oppressive and decolonizing framework
- Social impact measurement to assess progress at a project and program level, and guide next steps.
- A project implementation plan identifying key people and the shared decision-making process based on the RACI framework (Responsible, Accountable; Consulted; Informed);
- Consent, data sharing and intellectual property agreements and other such tools defined at the outset or as they emerge;
- Identify key learning/research questions that underpin the inquiry;
- Create space and a supportive environment for action learning and reflection between and among collaborative partners and others it engages, transforming transactional relationships into a cogenerating knowledge network; and,
- Invest time in planning wrapping-up processes.

## **POLICY AND FUNDERS**

To support meaningful and impactful equity-centred collaboratives:

- Provide time for the collaborating and backbone organizations to develop the internal structures, processes, skills and relationships that support the practice of collaboration;

- Build in flexibility to budget requirements to allow for cultural learning and meaningful relationship-building;
- Fund collaboratives grounded in collaboration and co-creative practices operating within inclusive, anti-oppressive and decolonizing frameworks; and,
- Fund collaboratives that have connections to diverse women founders or well-informed delivery organizations who understand their context, and have local and/or regional connections.

## **2. Project Application and Timelines**

### **POLICY AND FUNDERS**

To support collaborating organizations in accessing funding:

- Increase access to funding by adopting a lens of cultural humility and equity when designing application forms. Consider language, tone and criteria, and what applicant information is necessary for making an informed decision;
- Provide longer lead times to better enable collaborative efforts given the time it takes to find the right partners and hire the right staff;
- Design shorter application forms, (e.g., a two-stage process) to reduce the heavy burden most organizations experience when applying for investment; and
- Provide faster notification of results to increase organizations' viability and sustainability particularly in the areas of planning, budgeting and staff retention.

# Catalyst Two – Link and leverage ecosystem resources

## 3. Leveraging Ecosystem Relationships

### POLICY, FUNDERS AND COLLABORATIVES

To increase the effectiveness of investments, and create linkages within the ecosystem to advance knowledge sharing, co-generation and responsive tools and levers:

- Build mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships with collaboratives that extend beyond financial arrangements. Create opportunities for:
  - Peer learning and advocacy to assist each other in staying attuned to changing contexts, ecosystem gaps and priorities, enabling both parties to inform practices, reach goals, increase impact, and pivot or revise priorities as the need arises;
  - Engaging collaboratives in co-creating grant-making practices as part of systems change efforts in reducing power imbalances; and,
  - Providing collaboratives access to data, other funders and partners, expanding connections and networks and resources.

## 4. Ecosystem Supporter Programs

### POLICY, FUNDERS AND COLLABORATIVES

To enable ecosystem supporters to better serve diverse founders:

- Develop programs that assist ecosystem supporters in understanding the context and needs of diverse founders within an anti-oppressive and systems-informed lens. For example, WOSEN's Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development (SEED) delivered by Pillar Nonprofit Network.

## 5. Decolonized or Equitable Program Design, Development and Delivery

### COLLABORATIVES

To design, develop and deliver effective and inclusive programming:

- 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;
- Ensure programs are intentionally 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;
- Create authentic learning environments that engage participants in a variety of forms of intelligence and learning styles thereby encouraging founders to integrate these processes into their operations; and,
- Embed coaching and/or mentoring in all programs.



## 6. Knowledge Products and Mobilization

### COLLABORATIVES

To capture field learnings to share and advance the sector, create and mobilize knowledge products:

Budget for:

- Engaging with ecosystem supporters and contracted expertise in the co-design and development of products suitable to various audiences; and,
- Time and expertise for communication teams to locate effective distribution channels.

### POLICY AND FUNDERS

To advance sector learning through knowledge products and mobilization:

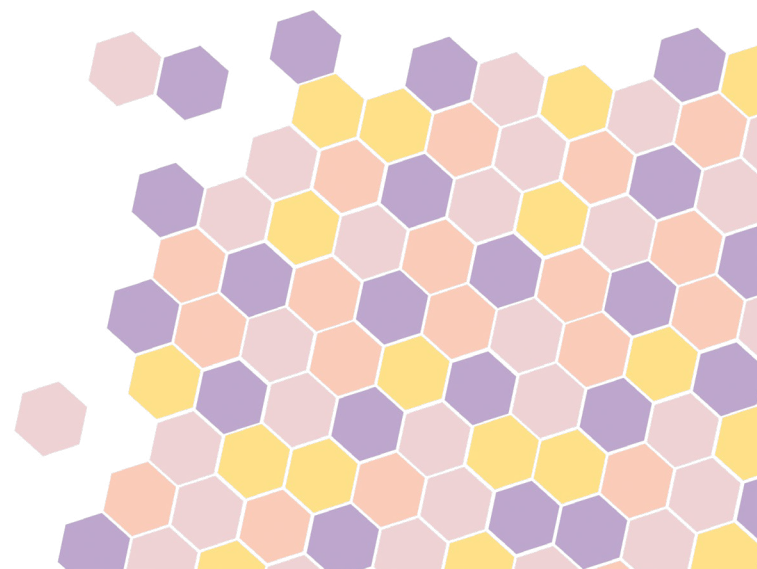
- Provide resources for co-creating knowledge products/resources in diverse formats;
- Support sharing stories of both successes and failures, providing entrepreneurs the opportunity to improve their strategies by learning from mistakes; and,
- Support communications teams in mobilizing knowledge products within the sector and circles of influence.

## 7. Project Duration

### POLICY AND FUNDERS

To increase the effectiveness and impact of investment, offer multi-year funding as part of a longer-term commitment to women's entrepreneurial infrastructure including the sustainability of collaboratives. Longer-term funding would support:

- Reaching intended groups who may be not be easily accessible and/or visible through mainstream channels;
- Building relationships within and across ecosystem silos and geographic, cultural and communities of practice;
- Collaborating in program and evaluation design, development, implementation and reiteration/evolution; and,
- Increasing and embodying professional development including co-leadership, co-creation and facilitation skills for centring equity.





## 8. Project Diversity and Flexibility

### POLICY AND FUNDERS

To build collaborative capacity to centre equity in serving diverse founders, including navigating unanticipated shifts, allow for more dynamic and emergent approaches:

- Support ‘Train the Trainer’ programs for acquiring new paradigm skills including equity-centred frameworks; embedding and embodying equity operationally and programmatically; collaborative leadership; collaborative program design, development, delivery; facilitation skills; relationship and trust building; data collection methodologies; principles-focused developmental evaluation; and,
- Provide opportunities to focus on a central issue while allowing for emergence and adjustment of activating strategies in achieving overall objectives.

## 9. Access to Capital

### POLICY, FUNDERS AND COLLABORATIVES

To provide access to seed capital:

- Allow for direct project investment in founders.

To support broader access to Investment Readiness Programs:

- Increase eligibility and availability for all sizes of businesses and services; and,
- Flow programs through more diverse collaboratives/delivery organizations who have networks to reach underserved entrepreneurs who may not be well connected to main informational channels.

## Catalyst Three – Gather meaningful data for targeted solutions

## 10. Data, Evaluation and Accountability

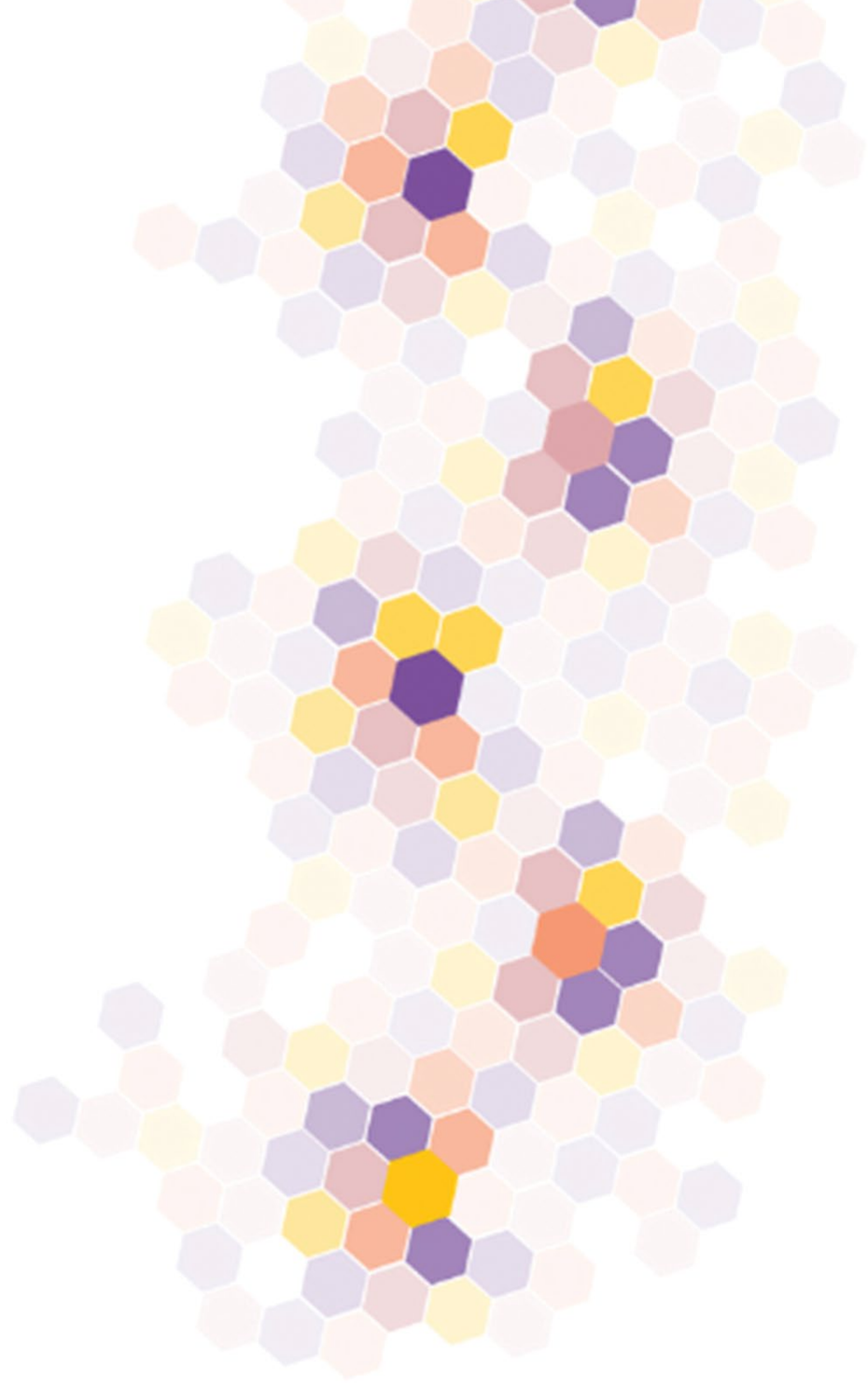
### COLLABORATIVES

To ensure robust, meaningful evaluation and accountability:

- Gather robust qualitative and quantitative data through a variety of tools, providing an authentic and multi-perspective context for analyzing operation and program effectiveness;
- Actively engage participants, guest facilitators/ speakers and coaches, delivery partners and practitioners in the evaluation process; and
- Embed iterative processes (i.e., observe, reflect, plan and act/ implement) to continuously respond to arising concerns, emerging innovation and evolution of ideas and action strategies.

## POLICY AND FUNDERS

- To ensure robust, meaningful evaluation and accountability:
- Fund staff time to design, build capacity for, and implement:
- Data collection, including methods and tools;
- Participatory analysis, reflection, and data-informed strategic actions;
- Developmental evaluation for ongoing analysis;
- Data sharing agreements including consent and intellectual property;
- Alternatively, (and/or in addition to staff support), provide funds to contract professional services for the above aspects of the project and/or to mentor staff to undertake such work.





# 4.0

## Conclusions

*“This is such important work and I hope that there are opportunities to take the work conducted by WOSEN forward, otherwise it will be very sad and a great loss to equity-seeking recipients.”*

*– WOSEN Practitioner Final Reflection, 2023*

The WES contribution has enabled WOSEN to address a number of the systemic barriers noted in Cuiker et al. (2022) by intentionally redesigning the entrepreneurial ecosystem’s approach to meet the needs of women<sup>7</sup> founders while simultaneously supporting organizations in ‘doing the hard work’ of centring equity.

WOSEN provides the sector with evidence-informed processes on ‘how to’ develop an equity-centric social entrepreneurship ecosystem. The initiative is contextualized within systems change and community economic development principles, providing a critical analysis of effective means for building, enhancing and expanding equity, and ‘how well’ strategies work — its impact and responses in addressing systemic barriers diverse women entrepreneurs encounter.

The work reveals the significant role collaborative and co-creative<sup>8</sup> processes contribute to building trust, shifting mindsets and identifying innovative equity-centred pathways forward. It illustrates ‘how to’:

<sup>7</sup> WOSEN programs specifically focused on women who were Indigenous, living in rural or remote regions, racialized, immigrants and/or those living with disabilities. Women includes genderqueer, two spirited, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary and gender non-conforming people.

<sup>8</sup> **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.

1. Collaborate to surface what women founders need to participate and prosper in business;
2. Build an ecosystem of trust to co-create effective equity-centred programing;
3. Assess the progress and impact of this work; and,
4. Increase the effectiveness of investment in women’s entrepreneurship.

As such, the WOSEN partners consider their collaborative and responsive approach a case study of a successful model for investing in women and creating the entrepreneurial infrastructure for them to prosper. They suggest that this model could be scaled to support others in advancing equity by building new paradigm capacity such as co-leadership, co-creation and emergent, reflective and participatory practices in developing resources, networks and pathways forward.

The collaborative intentionally weaves together recognized system change field practices and foundational community development principles and methodologies, creating an inclusive, anti-oppressive and decolonizing framework:

- i. equity-centred collective impact embedded in emergent collaborative and co-creation processes for the emergence of collective wisdom, social justice and social innovation;
- ii. principles-focused developmental evaluation, grounded in community development principles within iterative cycles of reflection (observe, reflect, plan and act/implement) and guided by WOSEN Design Principles<sup>9</sup>; and
- iii. social impact measurement, an intertwined system change assessment framework to evaluate progress at a project and program level, and guide its next steps.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the WOSEN Design Principles and practice framework please refer to the [Centring Equity Report](#), Section 2.0: Designing An Equity-Centred, Cogenerating Knowledge Network, as well as Pillar’s blog post, [WOSEN’s Design Principles: Moving beyond checkboxes to create systems change](#).



WOSEN's inquiry focuses on the foundational questions:

1. What do women founders need to participate and prosper in business?
2. How can WOSN support them?

Their Theory of Change identifies three catalyzing strategies that underpin how the collaborative developed an ecosystem of trusting relationships to co-create effective supports, and influence and direct investment toward supporting women entrepreneurs, thereby developing a more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

WOSEN's approach bridges relationships and builds trust and linkages between and among those seeking investment supports and those providing them. Embedded and embodied emergent processes create the space for adaptive capacity, moving from one mindset to another through increasing awareness of how underlying inner perceptions result in outer actions. The interaction fosters the development of a supportive equity-centred cogenerating knowledge network for the entrepreneurial ecosystem, building agency, commitment and pathways to direct investment toward effective and equitable supports.

The WOSN 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 effective programming, resources, relationships and networks to enable women to flourish. It moves away from current entrepreneurial supports and financing structures that are readily available and easy to deliver largely due to their limited relevancy and accessibility for those that fall outside of the dominant culture, choosing instead to develop a model that holistically supports 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.

The WOSN collaborative underscores the vital role collaboratives can play in the entrepreneurial ecosystem when adopting inclusive, anti-oppressive and decolonizing frameworks. Based on their experience, they offer ways to increase the effectiveness of investment through collaboratives, partnerships and advocacy, and program diversity, flexibility and duration, to name a few.



# References



Cukier, W., Mo, G. Y., Chavoushi, Z. H., Borova, B., Osten, V. (2022). *The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2022*. Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. Retrieved from: <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2022/>

Fenech, M., Jaimes, L., Rutsch, F., Schoen, G. & Muehlenbein, O. (2022). Supporting System Changers: The role of system thinking, leadership and wellbeing. Ashoka European Fellowship Program. Retrieved from: [https://fellowship-europe.ashoka.org/supportingsystem-changers-role-system-thinking-leadership-andwellbeing?mc\\_cid=6a1eace086&mc\\_eid=35e387f3e0](https://fellowship-europe.ashoka.org/supportingsystem-changers-role-system-thinking-leadership-andwellbeing?mc_cid=6a1eace086&mc_eid=35e387f3e0)

French, M. (2022). Five principles to get long-term, flexible funding into the hands of community-led organizations. *The Philanthropist*. Nov 15. Retrieved from: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2022/11/five-principles-to-get-long-term-flexible-funding-into-the-hands-of-community-led-organizations/>

Kania, J., Kramer, M., and Senge, P. (2018). *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG Reimagining Social Change. Retrieved from: [https://www.fsg.org/resource/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change/](https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/)

Kania, J., Williams, J., Schmitz, P., Brady, S., Kramer, M., & Splansky Juster, J. (2022). Centering Equity in Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 20(1), 38–45. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.48558/RN5M-CA77>

Senge, P., Hamilton, H., Kania, J. (2016) The Dawn of System Leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Winter. pp. 27-33. Retrieved from: [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_dawn\\_of\\_system\\_leadership](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership)

Stevenson, A., Bockstette, V., Seneviratne, A., Cain, M. & Foster, T. (2018). *Being the Change: 12 Ways Foundations Are Transforming Themselves to Transform Their Impact*. FSG. Retrieved from: <https://www.fsg.org/resource/being-change/#resource-downloads>



