Women First: Building Skills for Success

Final evaluation report



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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, women face multiple and systemic barriers to their engagement and success in training and employment (Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021; Hess et al., 2016). For women who experience multiple forms of marginalization (e.g., due to racism, ableism, poverty), these barriers are often compounded. In addition to facing a broad range of social, historical, economic, and health inequities, members of equity-deserving groups are often underserved by skills training and employment programming. For example, the cost and time commitments of training, physical and mental health challenges, the need to work multiple jobs, and a lack of affordable childcare are all associated with barriers that can inequitably limit access to training and employment (Auclair-Ouellet et al., 2022; Kaufmann et al., 2022; Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021). Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) through the Women's Employment Readiness (WER) pilot program, the Women First: Building Skills for Success ("Women First") project sought to intervene in this context by drawing on the knowledge and expertise of partners across the country to develop, deliver, test, and evaluate pre-employment and skills training for women facing multiple and complex barriers to employment.

This project was led by PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs (PTP), a Toronto-based provider with over 25 years' experience delivering adult learning and employment programs. PTP and five other service delivery organizations across Canada (Construction Foundation of British Columbia, Futureworx Society, Manitoba Building Trades Institute, Saint John Learning Exchange, and Seven Generations Education Institute) built on the success of their existing programs to deliver programming to equity-deserving women, including racialized, Indigenous, newcomer, low-income, disabled, and 2SLGBTQ+ women. As part of this project, all sites enhanced their models by incorporating a new Skills for Success curriculum and enhanced wraparound supports. Ultimately, the strength of the project was not in designing programs from the ground up, but in supporting partners to build on the work they already do and generating evidence from the collective knowledge, expertise, and resources of partners and their learners.

In addition to those designing and delivering services, the project involved several other key partners. Focus Company, a women-led project management firm, served as the project manager. Alberta Workforce Essential Skills (AWES) developed a new Skills for Success curriculum to meet the needs of delivery partners and the women they serve. AWES specializes in developing customized essential skills training solutions for industry, government, Indigenous and immigrant-serving organizations, and career and employment agencies. A team of researchers with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) designed and led the evaluation of the project, including authoring this report. SRDC is a non-profit research and evaluation organization that works collaboratively with partners across Canada through

rigorous, meaningful, and relevant research and evaluation that can guide policy and program development.

THIS REPORT

As the final evaluation report for the Women First project, this document presents a comprehensive picture of the background research, methods, and findings, led by SRDC in collaboration with project partners.

We begin by providing an overview of the project and examining how Skills for Success and wraparound supports can enhance programming for diverse women facing multiple barriers to employment. This is followed by a detailed description of our evaluation design and methods that generated the findings presented throughout the report. As an evaluation grounded in feminist, participatory, and anti-oppressive approaches, we highlight how these principles guided our work throughout the research process.

The results and final recommendations are structured across four key thematic sections, which have also been published as standalone briefs that readers can access directly:

1. Understanding and responding to learner realities - Exploring the diverse contexts and experiences of participants and the programs serving them
2. Employment and skills - Examining how skills development and employment outcomes were supported and achieved
3. Relationships, belonging, and community - Investigating the role of social connection and community in shaping participant experiences and outcomes
4. Wraparound supports - Analyzing how complementary supports enabled participation and enhanced outcomes

The findings presented are relevant to a range of audiences, including social service providers, employers, policymakers across jurisdictions, and researchers engaged with these topics. Ideally, they will also be of interest to community members, including and especially learners accessing employment and training programs like those in the Women First project.

Finally, we hope that the collective learnings and recommendations emerging from this project can support partner organizations to gain a deeper understanding of their programs and demonstrate their value to community partners, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders, with the ultimate aim of supporting inclusion, equity, justice, and joy for current and future learners.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the Women First project was to build on the collective experience and expertise of partners to develop, deliver, and evaluate pre-employment services and wraparound supports for diverse women facing multiple barriers to employment. The project placed particular emphasis on transferable skills training and comprehensive wraparound supports tailored to participants' individualized needs.

To achieve this overarching aim, project partners:

- Conducted a needs analysis that combined targeted literature reviews, a review of existing program documentation, and partner interviews and group discussions to identify common challenges, barriers, and promising practices across sites that could inform the project;
- Developed a customized Skills for Success curriculum designed to be incorporated into a range of existing pre-employment program offerings across diverse contexts;
- Designed, delivered, and tested pre-employment programs that integrated the Skills for Success curriculum and enhanced wraparound supports at six delivery sites spanning five Canadian provinces; and
- Conducted a rigorous, multi-methods evaluation to document implementation successes, lessons learned, promising practices, and project outcomes – including increased skills, improved wellbeing, and enhanced employability among learners – using a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) and intersectional feminist lens.

ACTIVITIES

Project initiation (August 2022 – September 2022)

Project partners developed a comprehensive workplan and established ways of working that sought to leverage the collective knowledge and expertise of all partners.

Design & planning (September 2022 – Oct 2022)

SRDC led an in-depth needs analysis to better understand the program models of each delivery partner, identify strong practices, and identify gaps that could inform the design of curriculum and wraparound supports. This included reviewing program documents, conducting interviews with team members from partner organizations, and facilitating collaborative sessions to develop detailed logic models for each program (as well as a collective project logic model). As the project team worked to define the scope of curriculum and wraparound support enhancements, SRDC developed two evidence briefs summarizing findings from targeted literature reviews focused on Skills for Success training and wraparound supports through a feminist lens.

Development (October 2022 – December 2022)

AWES further consulted with delivery partners to develop a tailored Skills for Success curriculum targeting adaptability and collaboration skills. Simultaneously, delivery partners prepared for program implementation by integrating the new curriculum and enhanced wraparound supports into their existing program models and activities, consulting with relevant employer or community partners, hiring and training staff, and finalizing budgets and implementation plans. SRDC developed a robust evaluation framework and plan for the project, including research questions, expected outcomes, and a data collection strategy and tools.

Delivery (January 2023 – July 2023)

Delivery partners recruited participants and began to deliver programming, with tailored variations across sites depending on the number of cohorts, program schedules, and program duration, among other factors. With SRDC's guidance, program staff assisted participants in navigating the informed consent process, collected and shared administrative data, and administered evaluation surveys. SRDC conducted in-depth interviews with program staff and learners across all six sites to gather rich qualitative data about their experiences in Women First programs, including elements that worked well and any challenges encountered; these were supplemented by arts-based methods (i.e., Photovoice and vision board/collage) to capture learners' perspectives through additional creative modalities. SRDC conducted at least one in-person site visit with all six partners to observe and better understand program implementation, as well as to lead data collection activities in person wherever possible.

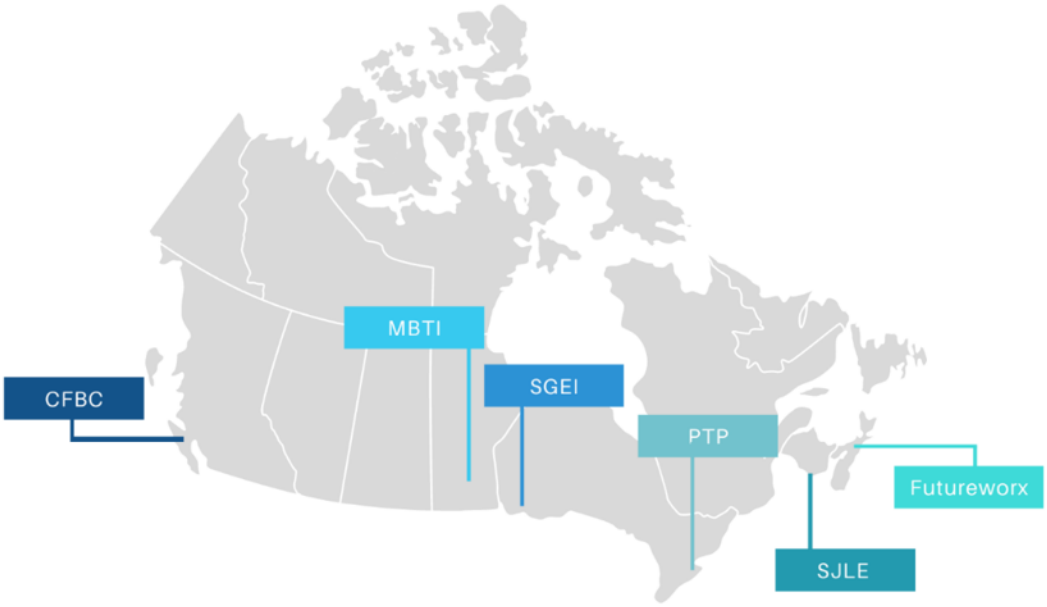
Project closing (July 2023 – September 2023)

A two-day project wrap-up meeting with all partners was held in Toronto in July 2023. Led by SRDC, this convening involved a series of facilitated discussions and activities to document key insights from the project, engage partners in a participatory data analysis exercise, and collectively generate recommendations emerging from the project. Over the next several months, SRDC conducted quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Project partners developed final reports for funders and other stakeholders.

DELIVERY PARTNERS

This project brought together partners from across Canada to develop, implement, and evaluate employment and skills training for a diversity of women. The six service delivery partners operate in multiple regions across Canada (see Figure 1) and reflect a range of program models and approaches to working with learners. Below we offer a brief overview of the partners involved in the project, as well as a description of their Women First programming.

Figure 1 Locations of Women First service delivery partners



PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs – Ontario

Duration: 12 weeks

Format: 2 cohorts

Location: Toronto, ON

Organization overview: Serving as both the project lead and a delivery partner, PTP has over 25 years of experience working with individuals from marginalized populations to improve their employment prospects through literacy and essential skills training, academic upgrading, pre-employment programming, sector-specific training, and employment services.

Women First programming: PTP integrated elements from two of their existing programs – Choices and Let's Connect – with the expectation of serving primarily racialized or low-income women with prolonged detachment from the labour force who may benefit from more intensive supports. Participants took part in a range of activities to build self-awareness, self-management (e.g., dealing with stress and other emotions), social skills (e.g., understanding the perspectives and feelings of others), relationship skills (e.g., communication, cooperation, managing conflict), and problem-solving and decision-making skills. These activities included employment counseling, self-care and mental health activities, and opportunities to connect with other women and service providers. The program aimed to support women to become better equipped to set and realize goals for their future, building on existing strengths while identifying and addressing outstanding needs.

Construction Foundation of British Columbia (CFBC) – British Columbia

Duration: 11 weeks

Format: 3 cohorts

Location: Blueberry River First Nations, Kamloops, & Surrey, BC

Organization overview: CFBC focuses on workforce development through skills training, applied learning, work experiences, job placements, and wraparound supports for diverse populations including youth, youth-at-risk, women, newcomers, and Indigenous communities. They work extensively with employers in construction, manufacturing, resource, and technology sectors.

Women First programming: CFBC's Sky Keepers program operated for the first time as part of the Women First project, serving Indigenous women in First Nations communities. The program centred around drone training, an emerging and growing industry in the region with flexible employment opportunities for women and potential economic opportunities for communities. Sky Keepers was driven by the interests and needs of women, which were explored at the start of the program and shaped the types of industry certifications, skills training, and other courses that were offered (e.g.,

entrepreneurship, Workplace Health and Safety, GED). An extensive range of wraparound supports were available to women, as well as cultural and empowerment workshops, cultural activities, and access to Elders. Employers from relevant industries (e.g., construction) were engaged to support and invest in the program (e.g., speaking to women, financial, work opportunities). By recruiting women from an existing CFBC community-based program (All Roads), women were offered greater continuity of support and relationships both before and after their participation in Sky Keepers.

Futureworx Society (FW) – Nova Scotia

Duration: 12 weeks

Format: 2 cohorts

Location: Truro, NS

Organization overview: Futureworx offers a range of training programs to assist unemployed individuals who have faced barriers in the labour market. Their programs seek to respond to the needs of both learners and employers, focused on the skills required for success in today's job market. All programs follow an integrated program delivery model and use the Futureworx-developed Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT).

Women First programming: Futureworx's Women First program aimed to uncover and address the obstacles affecting women's access to and success in employment. The program targeted clients who had intermittent or no attachment to the workforce. It was expected that the women served would have complex reasons for their prolonged detachment from the labour force and would benefit from supports and resources to enhance employability, develop new skills, and explore possible career paths. Over the eight-week program cycle, individuals received classroom instruction, participated in workshops and hands-on activities, and completed a two-week job shadowing component. Program graduates also received certification in several areas, including Diversity in the Workplace, Food Safety and Mental Health First Aid.

Manitoba Building Trades Institute (MBTI) – Manitoba

Duration: 11 weeks

Format: 2 cohorts

Location: Winnipeg & Sagkeeng First Nation, MB

Organization overview: MBTI operates under Manitoba Building Trades (MBT), which promotes the interests of 13 member unions and engages in partnerships to deliver safe, skilled, and productive labour. MBTI is the training division of MBTI and blends practical instruction, mentorship and on-the-job

experiences to program participants to prepare them for employment in skilled trades specialties, including Carpentry, Framing, Roofing, Plumbing, Building Efficiency, Electrical, and Mechanical Trades.

Women First programming: MBTI's program focused on developing skills for future employment opportunities while engaging learners to contribute to infrastructure development in their home communities. All participants were Indigenous, and started with work readiness training focused on essential and employability skills development, followed by classroom and practical construction trades instruction and safety training. Learning was applied through the completion of practical construction projects.

Saint John Learning Exchange (SJLE) – New Brunswick

Duration: Power Up: 10-12 weeks; Social Enterprises: 8 months

Format: Continuous intake

Location: Saint John, NB

Organization overview: SJLE assists individuals with significant barriers to education and employment to achieve their career goals through individualized pathways and programming designed to meet their unique needs. SJLE seeks to build soft skills, essential skills, digital literacy, and workplace experience through project-based learning opportunities. Many of the individuals accessing their programs are low-income, accessing provincial income assistance, or have experience of intergenerational poverty.

Women First programming: SJLE sought to enhance delivery of two existing programs as part of Women First. The first was *Power UP,* a 10-12 week leadership training program that supported low-income women to take their next steps in life. Women worked collectively and independently to build skills and prepare for further education or training, employment, or volunteer opportunities, participating in a range of modules (e.g., navigating challenges, working with others) and in volunteering opportunities. SJLE also included two of its social enterprise programs in the project (Stone Soup Café & Catering and Voila! Cleaning), where learners access on-the-job training in social emotional skills as well as one-on-one coaching.

Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI) – Ontario

Duration: 1) 9 months, 2) 3 months, 3) 5 weeks

Format: 3 cohorts

Location: Fort Frances & Sioux Lookout, ON

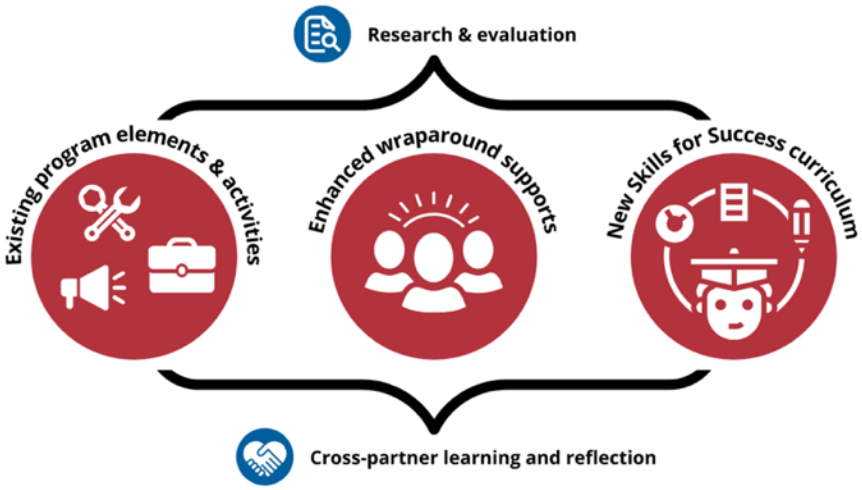
Organization overview: SGEI is an Indigenous-led educational organization that provides high school, post-secondary, employment, and cultural programming to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Treaty Three area and beyond. In operation since 1985, SGEI offers programming that respects Anishinaabe language and culture in more than 20 communities.

Women First programming: SGEI's *Azhemiinigoziwin* (Regaining Strength) program sought to enable and empower Indigenous women to gain employment skills and achieve success in their next stages of life. It was expected that most participants would have little to no formal labour market experience, with some also identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ or reporting disabilities. *Azhemiinigoziwin* incorporated pre-employment training, life skills, and career and skills exploration (e.g., woodworking, cooking) with a strong educational component (e.g., GED completion support) and cultural component, which included moccasin and hand drum-making, Anishinaabemowin classes, and traditional teachings. The ultimate goal was for participating women to either gain access to further education programs or employment.

KEY PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

Although program models, approaches, and activities varied across sites, all delivery partners made some common enhancements to their programs as part of the Women First project. In addition to adapting their existing programs to support the needs of diverse women, partners integrated Skills for Success training and enhanced wraparound supports with a gender-based and intersectional lens (see Figure 2). These two enhancements are described in further detail below. That said, partners had the flexibility to implement the skills training and wraparound supports in ways that fit their unique delivery contexts and learners. In designing and delivering their programs within the overarching Women First project, sites also benefited from cross-partner learning and reflection through project meetings and an informal community of practice, as well as research and evaluation support to build capacity and help articulate their program models and outcomes.

Figure 2 Summary of program components



Skills for Success training

The modern labour market is continuously evolving and characterized by rapid growth in technology, automation, and artificial intelligence; globalization; shifts in the nature of work (e.g., gig, contract); and an increased focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (Palameta et al., 2021). In May 2021, ESDC launched Canada's new Skills for Success framework, building on the strengths and successes of the former Essential Skills framework to better reflect our changing world. The framework continues to recognize the importance of core literacy skills (reading, writing, numeracy) while expanding the scope of other skills increasingly required in today's labour market (digital skills, problem solving). The framework brings a greater focus on social emotional skills which have been shown to be foundational in learning, employment, and life (Lalonde et al., 2019). Skills for Success expands our understanding of communication and collaboration, and introduces two new skills, adaptability and creativity and innovation.

Evidence Brief

Skills for Success in employment skills training: A feminist perspective

This brief offers an overview of key barriers, opportunities, and other considerations related to Skills for Success programming for multiply-marginalized women. Access this brief by clicking here or at srdc.org.

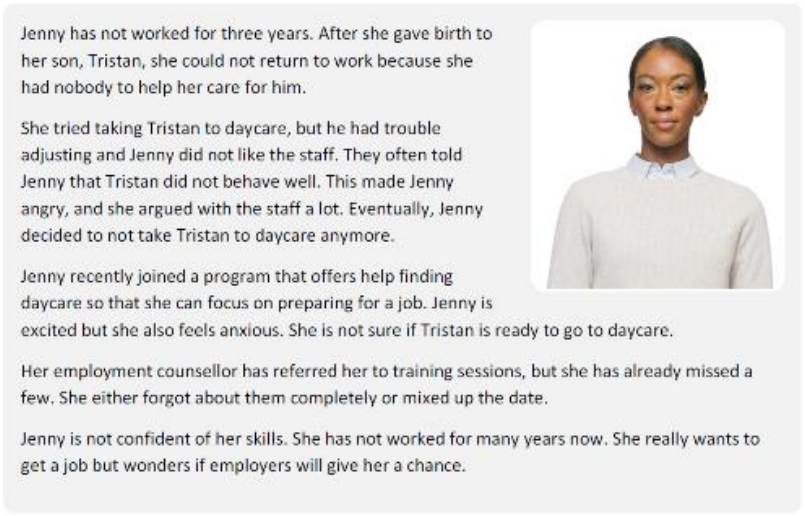
While there is strong evidence showing the impacts of skills training for learners and job seekers (Kankaraš & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019; Lalonde et al., 2019; Palameta et al., 2021), there are important gender-based and intersectional considerations to ensure meaningful opportunities and experiences for multiply-marginalized women. Equity-deserving groups often face additional barriers such as safety concerns, language barriers, accessibility, and competing family or other priorities (Nguyen et al., 2022). For Women First, this means partners needed to ensure key

factors are in place to support effective training, such as developing staff capacity, addressing barriers to access, integrating gender-based considerations into mainstream programming, developing gender-specific programming elements, and supporting women to develop a range of skills and showing their diverse capacities (Prendergast, 2020).

With these considerations in mind, and in consultation with delivery partners, AWES developed a new curriculum focused on two Skills for Success: adaptability and collaboration. While many of the delivery partners included skills training in their programs and likely already fostered social emotional skills, the curriculum was intended to bring a more explicit focus on these skills, particularly with a gender-based and intersectional lens, and more tightly align activities and learning with the new framework (e.g., specific skill components).

Each 15-hour skill curriculum contained three units centred around employment themes: *1. Getting ready for employment, 2. Onboarding and probationary period*, and *3. Thriving in the job*. Each unit came with a workbook for students, a PowerPoint presentation, and a guide for the facilitator. Units included three illustrative stories of women learners or jobseekers (see Figure 3). Each story was explored by follow-up learning and reflection activities (e.g., answering questions about the story, reflecting on own experiences, making a checklist, using a calendar). Each unit also included self-evaluation items at the beginning and end to help learners reflect on their growth in skills. The curriculum was designed to be modular and adaptable so that program staff could use and integrate the units that made sense for their program and learners.

Figure 3 Example adaptability story



Wraparound supports

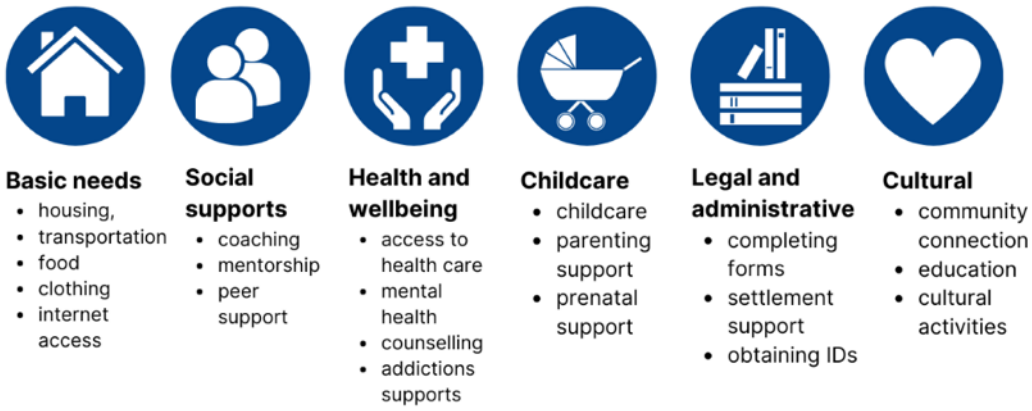
Wraparound supports refer to a customized suite of services, systems of referrals, and other interventions intended to support service users in all aspects of their lives and, as a result, enable them to succeed in programming (Bruns & Walker, 2008). Learners are unlikely to succeed in training and employment if they are coping with or addressing unmet needs in other areas of their lives, such as seeking housing, dealing with health or legal challenges, or working multiple entry-level jobs. However, integrating wraparound supports is more than providing add-on services that help learners engage with programming (Bruns & Walker, 2008). It can be seen as a client-centred, collaborative, and customizable approach that allows learners to establish their own priorities while practitioners take a supportive role to help learners find supports to address their needs, leverage existing strengths, overcome challenges, and reach their goals. Figure 4 depicts some examples of common wraparound supports.

Evidence Brief

Wraparound supports in employment and skills training: A feminist perspective

This brief offers an overview of wraparound supports and outlines considerations and approaches to support its implementation in employment and skills training. Access this brief by clicking here or at srdc.org.

Figure 4 Examples of wraparound supports



Equity-deserving groups in Canada – including women, youth, Indigenous people, newcomers, racialized people, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and low-income individuals – are often underserved by pre-employment programming. They are also more likely to experience a broad range of social, historical, economic, and health inequities that can translate to barriers to entering, engaging, and succeeding in training and employment (Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021; Hess et al., 2016). The integration of wraparound supports has been identified as a priority for inclusive service delivery (Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021; Zhong & Shetty, 2021). Adopting a gender-based and intersectional approach highlights certain guiding principles such as the use of

trauma- and violence-informed approaches, strengths-based models, culturally competent programming, and individualized and unconditional care (Bruns & Walker, 2008; Elliott et al., 2005).

Most of the service delivery partners already provided wraparound supports within their programming. However, as part of the Women First project, partners were provided additional funds ($5,000 per learner) to build on their existing supports and provide higher quantity or quality of supports with more flexibility. The intention was that each site would have considerable freedom in how this money was spent (e.g., technology, housing) and it could be used in a responsive and individualized way as challenges emerged with learners. This would also support project learning regarding the types of needs women experienced, and the types of supports that best met those needs.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The following sections describe our approach to the evaluation, key elements of our evaluation design, the data collection methods used, and our data analysis strategies.

APPROACH

SRDC committed to an evaluation that was centred on the needs and priorities of project partners and those they served, grounded in intersectional feminist, participatory, and anti-oppressive principles and conducted with a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens. The Women First project team mostly comprised women, who brought a range of lived, academic, professional, and community experiences. In practice, implementing an intersectional feminist, anti-oppressive approach that embraced the values of inclusivity, collaboration, action-orientation, equity, and justice (Hay, 2012; LaFrance & Nichols, 2008; Podems, 2010) meant:

- Acknowledging that "evaluation is a political activity" (Podems, 2010, p. 4) and recognizing the historic and ongoing tensions associated with research and evaluation among program participants, service providers, and community members. This included transparency and reflection on how researcher experiences, perspectives, and social locations shaped the evaluation (Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002). We engaged in ongoing dialogue with partners with a commitment to building trust, respecting diverse ways of knowing, and remaining open to continuous feedback and learning.

- Challenging – not just accounting for – gender-based and intersecting forms of inequity, which were understood as systemic and structural rather than individual in nature. Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality is a theoretical and analytical framework that emphasizes the interacting – rather than merely additive – nature of different forms of discrimination and oppression. Intersectionality proposes that various systems of power (e.g., heterosexism, racism, ableism) collide to create unique and often compounding forms of exclusion and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). A core objective of the project was to address these inequities and their symptoms through the evaluation process and its findings (Podems, 2014) and was reflected in our design (e.g., collecting detailed data on socio-demographics, experiences of exclusion or discrimination, etc.).

- Recognizing lived and living experience as a valid and essential source of knowledge. For example, we facilitated intentional, safe, and compensated spaces for participants, program staff, and other individuals to share their perspectives and experiences, and sought to represent these in authentic and ethical ways that reflected the project's values.

- Creating opportunities for partners, program staff, and participants to engage in and benefit from the evaluation in meaningful and accessible ways. We regularly solicited feedback on evaluation activities (i.e., on data collection tools or deliverables), facilitated capacity-building (e.g., hosting a partner workshop on developing program logic models), and created opportunities for deeper and more collaborative engagement (e.g., convening an Evaluation Advisory Group, opportunities for participatory analysis).

- Making participation accessible and valuable for program partners and participants. For example, we tailored the evaluation to partner needs and minimized administrative burdens, as much as possible. We did our best to ensure the evaluation was reflective of and appropriate for participants, and reduced barriers to participation (e.g., provided honoraria, considered access needs wherever possible, used trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches).

- Embracing responsiveness and reciprocity to support partner organizations to generate the evidence they needed to improve their programs and demonstrate their value. We recognized that evaluation relies extensively on the labour and contributions of others, and explored ways to maximize its relevance, usefulness, and value for all involved.

Core evaluation values

- Valuing **diverse sources of knowledge,** with particular emphasis on women's voices and experiences
- Attending to **questions of power** and our own positions and privileges as evaluators
- Leaning into **curiosity** and making space for the unexpected
- Adopting a **holistic approach** that considers outcomes related to health and wellbeing, community, and culture, among others
- Focusing on **relevance,** and collecting only data that is useful and necessary
- Prioritizing **transparency and honesty,** including to capture what may not be working (and why)
- Understanding **relationship-building, reciprocity, and collaboration** as essential for the evaluation
- Pursuing **quality and rigour** in all that we do
- Embracing a **courageous, humble, and learning-oriented** evaluation approach

LOGIC MODEL

A logic model serves as a helpful starting point for designing an evaluation by articulating our understanding of a program, specifically the relationship between inputs (i.e., resources going into a program), activities (i.e., what is carried out as part of a program), outputs (i.e., tangible products or results from program activities), and outcomes (i.e., the changes expected to result from the program). While SRDC worked with each delivery partner to develop program-specific logic models, we also developed an overarching project model that emphasized common elements across sites (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Women First: Project logic model

WOMEN FIRST: Project Logic Model

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES		
• Women's Employment Readiness pilot funding • Diversity of partner knowledge and expertise, including related to programming, curriculum development, project management, and research and evaluation • Program staff with extensive lived and service delivery experience • Organizational and program values • Partnerships external to the project (e.g., with service providers, employers, etc.) • Existing program materials, curriculum, infrastructure, and assessment tools	**Design, development, & planning** • Convene partners and launch project • Initiate regular project partner meetings • Engage with partners to inform evaluation plan and new Skills for Success curriculum • Conduct and share research to inform potential program enhancements among sites • Incorporate program enhancements/adaptations • Develop data collection/reporting processes • Finalize implementation and evaluation plans **Delivery** • Recruit participants and conduct intakes to determine program eligibility and fit, as well as identify initial supports needed • Develop trusting relationships with women • Deliver unique program elements (e.g., cultural activities, work placements, job counselling) • Deliver new Skills for Success curriculum, with a focus on Adaptability and Collaboration • Provide individualized wraparound supports to participating women based on needs and goals • Support learners to identify/pursue next steps (e.g., training, employment, referrals) • Collect and report necessary data to ESDC **Evaluation** • Develop evaluation plan and tools • Enrol learners in evaluation, with their consent • Convene evaluation advisory group • Engage with partners via site visits/implementation research, capacity-building efforts, and participatory evaluation activities (e.g., co-analysis) • Collect and analyze data from multiple sources, including SRDC's evaluation activities, program/ administrative data, and ESDC data • Synthesize and share evaluation findings	• 6 test sites delivering enhanced programming • 160 women participating in programs, including receiving new Skills for Success training and enhanced wraparound supports • Skills for Success curriculum developed and finalized based on project feedback and learnings • Monthly partner reports • Interim evaluation deliverables (e.g., evidence briefs, needs analysis) • Project evaluation plan • Evaluation consent and enrolment from participating women • Project and program-specific logic models • Data collection tools (e.g., PMIS, surveys, qualitative tools) • Final evaluation report and other relevant knowledge sharing materials (e.g., program-specific summaries) documenting outcomes measured, lessons learned, etc. through a GBA+/feminist lens	**Short-term:** Women: • High levels of program satisfaction, engagement, and safety/comfort • ↑ awareness of available supports and services, within and beyond partner organization • ↓ barriers to education, training, employment, and community engagement • ↑ Skills for Success, particularly Adaptability and Collaboration • ↑ other relevant employment, socio-emotional, or "soft" skills • ↑ career adaptability, decision-making, self-efficacy, and job search clarity/skills • ↑ capacity for self-awareness and reflection, including recognition of strengths and areas for improvement • ↑ goal-setting capacity • ↑ clarity on and identification of next steps following program Service providers: • ↑ understanding of distinct needs, barriers, and strengths of equity-deserving women • ↑ awareness of staff competencies, strengths, and areas for improvement in program delivery • ↑ access to resources and tools to deliver women-focused training and programs, including through an intersectional feminist/ anti-oppressive approach	**Medium-term:** Women: • ↑ pursuit of and access to next steps, including employment, further education and training, volunteering, etc. • ↑ access to/use of available supports and services, within and beyond partner organization • ↑ access to basic needs • ↑ confidence and self-esteem • ↑ sense of belonging and connection with other women, delivery partner, and broader community • ↑ social and professional networks • ↑ perseverance, coping, and self-care skills • ↑ overall wellbeing; ↓ stress Service providers: • ↑ knowledge of promising practices in supporting equity-deserving women • ↑ confidence and preparedness to deliver gender-focused programs • ↑ evaluation knowledge and capacity, including through a feminist/gender- responsive lens • ↑ partnerships and referral capacity • ↑ application of resources and tools to deliver women-focused programming, including through an intersectional feminist/anti-oppressive approach • ↑ capacity to demonstrate value of programming SRDC: • ↑ understanding of and confidence in feminist/anti-oppressive evaluation based on project learnings Policymakers: • ↑ awareness of/access to evidence about the value, challenges, and promising practices for employment and skills training for equity-deserving women	**Long-term:** Women: • ↑ longer-term job outcomes (e.g., retention, progression, earnings, etc.) • ↑ life satisfaction and quality of life • ↑ financial security • ↑ sense of empowerment and agency Service providers: • ↑ ongoing program enhancements and improvements to support equity-deserving participants • ↑ commitment to and utilization of evaluation • ↑ access to funding and resources for gender-focused programming • ↑ program sustainability SRDC: • ↑ application of lessons learned and promising practices for feminist/ anti-oppressive evaluation Policymakers: • ↑ funding and support for gender-focused programming based on available evidence

Outcomes

While the primary focus of the evaluation was participant outcomes, the logic model included outcomes for service providers, evaluators, and policymakers to acknowledge important learning and capacity building for all involved. Although the scope of the evaluation did not allow for the formal assessments of outcomes for all stakeholders, we do attend to some partner outcomes in this report. The evaluation emphasized common outcomes across the delivery sites, but where feasible and appropriate, we highlighted some unique outcomes of specific programs (e.g., cultural awareness and connection among programs serving Indigenous women).

The evaluation measured a range of participant outcomes within the following domains.

- Employment and skills – With the emphasis on Skills for Success and employability, we expected changes in various skill areas such as adaptability and collaboration, career-decision-making, and job search. While sites varied in their focus on supporting participants directly into employment and education, we included outcomes such as enrolment in further education or training, employment status, and plans for education, training, and employment.

- Relationships and belonging – We were interested in understanding how women-focused programs could foster connections between women and program staff. Further, many of the programs included components to increase connection and belonging to culture and the community, as well as broaden social networks.

- Health and wellbeing – Given the holistic approach of many of the participating programs as well as the enhanced wraparound supports offered, we expected to see some changes in overall well-being, including general life stress, access to basic needs, and life satisfaction.

- Wraparound supports – With enhanced wraparound supports, we were interested in assessing whether participants experienced any reductions in barriers and life stress, increased access to resources, and a sense that their needs were being met in programs.

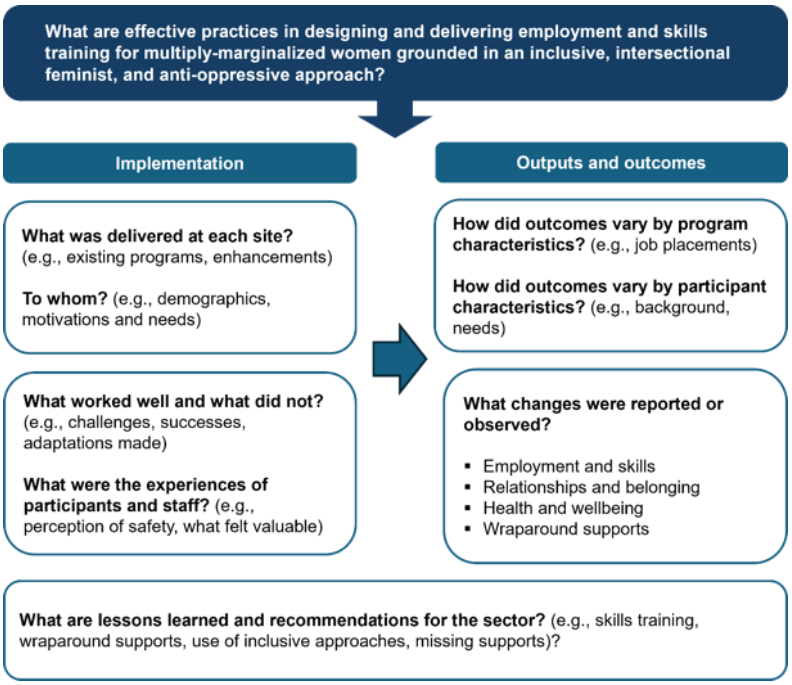
It was expected that outcomes would likely vary among participants and programs depending on a number of contextual factors. These included program factors (e.g., location, duration and intensity of training, participant population, available resources), employment factors (e.g., local labour market, target sector), and participants' individual factors (e.g., socio-demographics, social location, skills levels, barriers faced). With this in mind, we collected socio-demographic and program implementation data to better understand how outcomes varied across programs and for different groups of women. Given the short time span of the project, the evaluation prioritized short-term outcomes that were expected at the end of program, and to a lesser extent medium-term outcomes (expected one to two months after the end of programs). Long-term

outcomes, while outside the scope of this evaluation, were those that we might expect to be realized over time should short- and medium-term outcomes occur as planned.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The overarching question that guided the evaluation was: *"What are effective practices in designing and delivering employment and skills training for multiply-marginalized women grounded in an inclusive, intersectional feminist, and anti-oppressive approach?"* To answer this question, the evaluation asked a series of implementation-focused and outcomes-focused questions (see Figure 6). Implementation questions helped us document what was delivered at each site (e.g., how the Skills for Success curriculum was used, what wraparound supports were provided), how it went, and how they were experienced by participants and program staff. These findings helped identify effective practices and areas for improvement and added meaning to observed outcomes (e.g., lack of changes in certain outcomes could be related to challenges in delivering those supports). These questions also helped us gain a deeper understanding of who participated in the programs by facilitating a more thorough understanding of their backgrounds and circumstances coming into the programs. Outcomes questions helped us assess what changes occurred as a result of participation in pre-employment and skills training. This included understanding how program and individual characteristics affect outcomes (e.g., if some groups of women experience outcomes differently).

Figure 6 Evaluation questions



RESEARCH DESIGN

Our evaluation integrated the following research design elements.

Multi-level analysis

The evaluation primarily focused on project-level processes and outcomes across the six delivery sites. Although each organization had its own unique approach, all programs incorporated shared program elements (e.g., Skills for Success curriculum, enhanced wraparound supports), pursued similar outcomes, and were guided by the strengths, interests, barriers, and needs of the women they served. Project-level analyses helped us to identify program components and practices that were effective across different contexts, and document outcomes we could expect more generally when women access programs with these shared elements. These findings generated recommendations that are broadly applicable to the sector. The evaluation also examined processes and outcomes at the program-level, especially when certain program components were central to one or a few program models (e.g., work placements at Futureworx, land-based activities at SGEI). Program-level findings generated valuable insights into how a range of program models, activities, and approach might effectively serve different groups of women. It also supported learning, program improvement, and capacity-building among partners. Some of these program-specific findings are highlighted in the context of project-level findings in this report, while more detailed results were shared directly with service delivery partners.

Mixed-methods approach

The evaluation used a mixed-methods design, collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data to address the evaluation questions. Establishing multiple lines of inquiry and multiple ways for diverse stakeholders to participate in the data collection process allowed for triangulation of findings and promoted a more rigorous evaluation with more reliable conclusions and recommendations. Furthermore, while qualitative methods are not in and of themselves feminist or anti-oppressive, they were particularly powerful in uncovering perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, as well as creating space to feature lived or living experience as a valid source of evidence (Brisolara, 2014). Quantitative results were effective in summarizing group-level changes, but qualitative results contextualized those findings, provided greater insight, and brought them to life with individual and collective stories and experiences.

Pre-post design

The evaluation used a pre-post design to determine if any changes in learner outcomes occurred during program delivery. This involved measuring pre-program or baseline levels with surveys for some of our key outcomes (e.g., skills, relationships, well-being) and comparing them with post-program levels. For some sites we were also able to collect data on outcomes one or two months after the end of program to see if any changes were sustained in the medium-term. While this type of design allowed us to report on observed changes, it was more difficult to attribute changes directly to the training. Without a control or comparison group that did not receive training, we cannot state with certainty whether learners might have improved their skills or outcomes on their own or with other standard services available. While recognizing this limitation, the use of a mixed-methods approach and integration of qualitative data contextualized our pre-post survey results and provided greater insight into how program elements did or did not support learner outcomes. Furthermore, the use of experimental designs like randomized control trials could pose distinct challenges and limitations for evaluations grounded in a feminist approach, including ethical concerns, a focus on a more limited and narrow set of outcomes, and amplified risk of excluding diverse voices and perspectives (Bamberger et al., 2016; Jiha, 2020).

Participatory design & analysis

An Evaluation Advisory Group (EAG) is a group of individuals who have been invited by the evaluator, project lead, or project partners to provide advice and guidance, share feedback, and make recommendations on a project's evaluation activities. It can provide meaningful opportunities for those directly implicated in a program being evaluated (e.g., service users, staff) to have a greater voice in the evaluation process, connect with others in the project, and build their research and evaluation skills. Further, it support a more relational approach to evaluation by bringing together various project stakeholders for a shared aim and ensure the evaluation is reflective of and responsive to program contexts and communities. In these ways, effective use of an EAG can support an evaluation process to be more participatory, collaborative, empowering, and equitable, consistent with intersectional feminist approaches (Suarez-Balcazar & Harper, 2003; McBride et al., 2014; Podems, 2010; Fawcett et al., 2003; Harper et al., 2003; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; Stern et al., 2019; Cohen, 2012).

SRDC developed an EAG consisting of service providers from Women First organizations, a selection of community partners, and current and former program participants. The EAG met six times throughout the project, and provided reflections, feedback, and recommendations around evaluation materials (e.g., evaluation plan, data collection tools), in addition to interpreting and contextualizing preliminary evaluation results. Members were provided honoraria to

acknowledge their time and commitment and reduce barriers to participation. As part of a participatory approach, SRDC also conducted data analysis sessions with project partners during an in-person meeting near the end of the project. This provided an opportunity for partners to share experiences and learnings, collectively interpret and provide meaning to data, and co-create recommendations based on the evaluation findings.

DATA COLLECTION

Below we describe the different types of data used to answer the evaluation questions. To support with qualitative data collection and relationship-building with sites, we conducted two-day in-person site visits for all the sites at least once throughout the project duration. The site visits typically occurred near the end of each cohort. They provided a valuable opportunity for the evaluation team to conduct one-on-one participant and staff interviews, facilitate arts-based methods, and observe program activities.

Administrative & program data

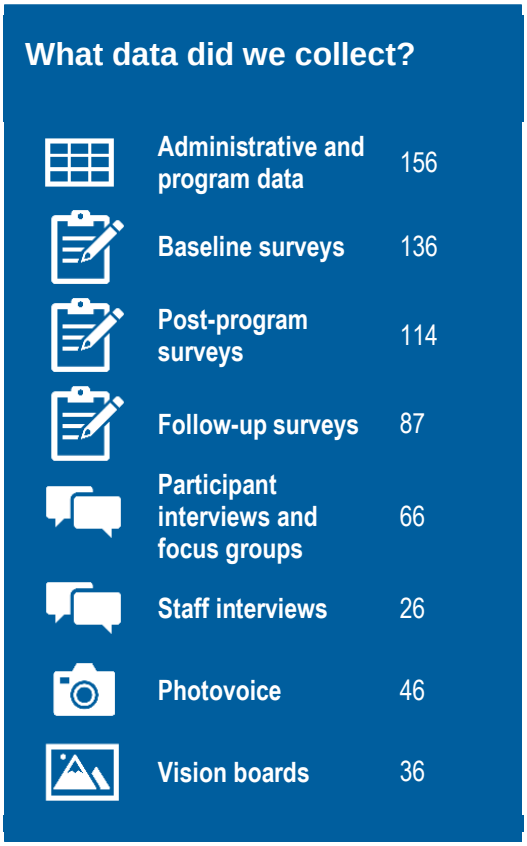
Delivery partners collected and shared administrative and program data including intake information, attendance and participation in various program components, and results from relevant program activities (e.g., skills self-assessments, reflections, existing evaluation tools). With learner consent, delivery partners also shared data collected to inform ESDC's broader evaluation and reporting, including learner socio-demographics and use of wraparound supports. Administrative and program data helped us address implementation questions related to what was delivered and contextualize observed outcomes (e.g., poor outcomes could be linked to low attendance).

Participant surveys

SRDC developed three participant surveys which were administered by program staff either online or with pencil and paper format. SRDC worked with delivery partners and the EAG to ensure surveys items were relevant, inclusive, and appropriate for all learners at each site. Additionally, participants were provided with a $25 honorarium (via e-transfer or gift card) for each completed survey as a recognition of their time and contribution to the evaluation. Program staff were encouraged to dedicate time in-program for baseline and post-program survey completion and to support learners with any questions, as needed.

The baseline survey was administered towards the beginning of programs and included background questions related to socio-demographic information (e.g., gender identity, disability) and labour market barriers and facilitators. It also included question related to our key outcome

domains, such as employment and skills (e.g., adaptability and collaboration, career decision-making, job search skills), relationships and belonging (e.g., sense of belonging, social network), health and well-being (e.g., stress, self-esteem, life satisfaction), and wraparound supports (e.g., having needs met). The survey included both quantitative (e.g., ratings, multiple-choice) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended) questions, drawing on validated measures when possible and creating new measures as needed to meet specific project or partner needs.



The post-program survey was administered near the end of the program and included an overlapping set of questions with the baseline survey to assess change over time in employment and skills, relationships and belonging, health and wellbeing, and wraparound supports. It also included additional questions assessing participant program experience (e.g., safety, relevance of material), access to resources, and wraparound supports (e.g., what was helpful, extent to which needs were met).

The follow-up survey was a shorter optional online survey administered one to two months after the end of program by some sites. Like the post-program survey, it included a subset of questions that overlapped with the baseline to assess if any changes were maintained over time (e.g., skills, wellbeing). It also included additional questions to learn about how participants were doing (e.g., employment, activities, barriers) and asked participants to reflect on any changes experienced since the program ended. While surveys prioritized measures that were common across all sites (i.e., to facilitate comparability and support larger sample sizes), some site-specific measures were included as well to facilitate program-level analyses (e.g., connection to Indigenous culture, outcomes related to work placements).

Participant & staff interviews

SRDC conducted qualitative interviews with learners and program staff which were particularly important for answering implementation questions related to what worked well, what was challenging, and how delivery was experienced. Interviews were conducted near the end of

program delivery with each cohort at each delivery site. In some cases, these were conducted virtually, and in other cases, they were conducted as part of in-person site visits. While most of the participants who spoke with researchers did so through interviews (n=60), for one cohort at one site, we opted for a focus group with participants instead (n=6).

Participant interviews included questions related to their employment journey and motivations for participating (e.g., barriers, goals), program experiences (e.g., what was helpful, what was not, feelings of safety and inclusivity), and program outcomes (e.g., what they perceived as valuable benefits and gains). Participants were provided with a $50 honorarium (via e-transfer or gift card) as a recognition of their time and contributions through the interview. Staff interviews included questions related to program delivery and context (e.g., what went well or not, challenges, experience delivering women-only program) and program outcomes (e.g., changes in learners, staff learning).

Arts-based methods

The evaluation used two participatory, arts-based research methods – Photovoice and vision boards – that offered alternative and compelling ways to share authentic lived experiences. The decision to introduce both methods in this project was informed by discussions with project partners and EAG members alike, who were interested in exploring additional methods that were inclusive, participatory, accessible, and culturally responsive. These methods have been used widely with equity-deserving communities, and can be particularly effective in cultivating more accessible, engaging, and empowering platforms for participants to share their experiences and perspectives. We found that Women First learners were eager and forthcoming in these qualitative evaluation activities, and received positive feedback to this end. Moreover, staff were very supportive in helping to integrate these activities into site visits and supporting the required preparation of the activities prior to SRDC's arrival.

Delivery partners were closely involved in decisions about methodological approaches best suited for their learners. For Photovoice, participants were asked to take three photographs in response to a selection of prompts (e.g., changes that occurred, important supports, things they learned, feelings about the future) and caption and describe these in a separate reflection sheet. For vision boards, participants created collages with images, words, and other materials to reflect their journey through the program (e.g., where they started, during the program, where they are going), and completed reflection sheets to describe their vision board. After the Photovoice or vision boards, SRDC facilitated group discussions where participants could share their work with the group (with their consent) and engage in discussion and reflection about their experiences in the program. Participants were provided with a $50 honorarium (via e-transfer or gift card) for completing the Photovoice or a vision board activity. Project partners were also engaged in a

Photovoice activity towards the end of the project, using a series of guided prompts to encourage reflection on the project, key lessons, and next steps.

The integration of arts-based methods was especially effective in ensuring all participants had an opportunity to share, as well as eliciting thoughtful insights about program experiences, outcomes, and recommendations. It also allowed participants to draw on a wider range of materials and modes (e.g., drawing, writing, images) to describe these experiences and outcomes. Images from the Photovoice and vision board activities are included throughout this report. Note that where participants consented to be named with their photos, this is indicated.

DATA ANALYSIS

Our data analysis strategy focused on responding to the evaluation questions outlined previously, adopting a GBA+/feminist lens throughout this process (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Bauer, 2021; Bauer et al., 2021; Grace, 2014). The analysis leveraged both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources, as described above. Such an approach allowed us to explore relationships between data sources, enhance the validity and reliability of our findings, and enrich our understanding of the experiences and outcomes associated with the project. For example, while the analysis of quantitative data can help demonstrate group-level changes (e.g., women as a group reported increased life satisfaction scores), qualitative analysis can offer additional context and richness to this data (e.g., how women conceptualize life satisfaction and the distinct ways a program contributed to it) and support a more nuanced interpretation of the data. Drawing on multiple data sources can also strengthen our confidence in evaluation findings and highlight inconsistencies or gaps to be explored (e.g., staff report increased adaptability skills in women that are not reflected in self-reported data). Lastly, this approach can help ensure data coverage when some information may be missing (e.g., no follow-up data from participant, but staff tracked employment outcomes using the PMIS).

Quantitative

Quantitative analysis was conducted with participant survey and administrative data, with a particular emphasis on measuring learner outcomes. The analysis explored both the project and program levels by considering a combination of indicators and outcomes measures that are common across the project as well as unique to certain programs. Paired group comparisons (t-tests) were used to evaluate gains after the program (comparing baseline and post-program scores), and their maintenance over time (comparing baseline and follow-up scores). Changes in distributions (e.g., per cent of learners that report high scores) are also reported to further illustrate changes.

To explore the role of identity and contextual factors, sub-group analyses were also conducted. Basic multivariate analysis like linear regression was used to explore the role of some group factors in predicting differences in baseline scores, gains achieved during the program, and how these gains were retained over time. In these analyses, separate regression analyses were run with contextual and socio-demographic factors as independent variables and key outcomes (e.g., skill gains, changes in belonging) as dependent variables. When assessing for differences in skill gains, we incorporated the baseline score as a control variable. We also employed advanced techniques such as generalized linear mixed models, using key outcome indicators (e.g., survey answers, test scores, employment outcomes) as dependent variables and timepoints and socio-demographic characteristics as fixed factors. Our models will also account for interactions between these factors, using random effects to account for differences between participants and between sites. Through using both analysis methodologies, we have increased confidence in the results. Finally, descriptive statistics are reported to offer a portrait of participants' characteristics and the distribution of key outcome indicators.

Qualitative

Qualitative analysis drew on thematic analysis to analyze a range of data (e.g., open-ended survey questions, interviews, arts-based data from photovoice and vision boards, group discussions) collected from participants and staff involved in programs (e.g., program facilitators, instructors, coordinators, management) from each partner organization. Members of the evaluation team worked collaboratively to identify, analyze, and report on key themes, findings, and lessons from these data sources. In alignment with an intersectional approach, our qualitative analysis intentionally sought to uncover the ways in which learners' perspectives and experiences were shaped by diverse social locations and intersecting systems of power. Site visits at each of the partner organizations were particularly valuable for gaining a deeper understanding of participants' social locations and the way these intersected with the broader community context.

"EVERYONE'S SUCCESS LOOKS DIFFERENT": UNDERSTANDING & RESPONDING TO LEARNING REALITIES

Feminist approaches to research and evaluation ask us to attend carefully to context, asking that we "investigat[e] and describ[e] relevant social, cultural, economic, power, and identity issues… recognizing that such questions may bring to light previously unseen conditions or dynamics that affect the program's (or participants') outcomes or possibilities" (Brisolara, 2014, p. 24). This section provides an overview of the broader context of the Women First project, as well as the conditions and dynamics informing the implementation of participating programs. This includes further details about service delivery partner organizations and their program offerings, as well as a more intricate portrait of the women who took part. Together, these inform a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the evaluation findings, including both the experiences and outcomes of learners.

WOMEN FIRST PARTNERS: A CLOSER LOOK

Partner & program summary

The Women First project sought to leverage service delivery partners' knowledge and expertise through adaptations to their existing program models. Through their participation in the project, all six partner sites had access to 1) a new Skills for Success curriculum focused on adaptability and collaboration and 2) funding to deliver enhanced wraparound supports for learners.

Rather than designing new programs from the ground up, the strength of the project was in supporting partners to sustain, reflect on, and enhance the work they were already doing, supported by responsive and collaborative evaluation and opportunities for collective learning. While partners tested new approaches to their unique programs, the project also represented an opportunity for partners to generate evidence about the broader function and value of sustained, inclusive, and accessible programming to meaningfully support those furthest from the labour market.

More details about the unique features and aims of each Women First partner and project are available in the full evaluation report. For the purposes of this section, partners' program offerings are summarized in Table 1.

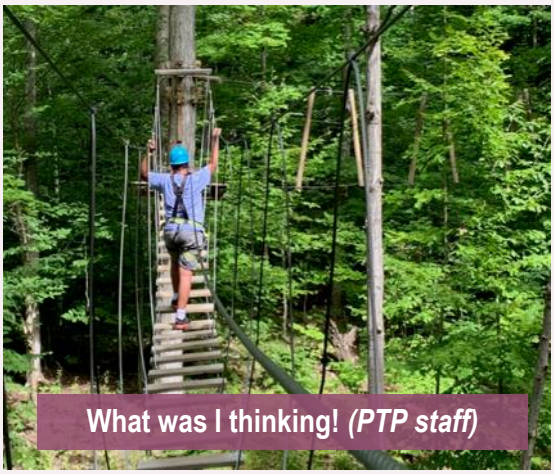
Table 1 Summary of participating Women First programs

Partner	Location(s)	Main components
CFBC	Blueberry River First Nations, BC Kamloops, BC Surrey, BC (virtual)	▪ Drone operator training ▪ Road-mapping and goal identification exercises ▪ Skills-building and cultural workshops (e.g., computer skills, financial literacy, guest speakers) ▪ Support completing education (e.g., GED) or obtaining relevant certificates/documentation (e.g., driver's license, safety certificates) ▪ Support finding future job placements or work opportunities ▪ Engagement with employers in relevant industries (e.g., construction)
Futureworx	Truro, NS	▪ Skills development and assessment using the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) ▪ Community-based activities (e.g., workshops by community partners, mentorship program, participation in community events) ▪ Training and certifications (e.g., Diversity in the Workplace, Food Safety, Mental Health First Aid) ▪ Two-week job shadowing/work placement component
MBTI	Winnipeg, MB Sagkeeng First Nation, MB	▪ Work readiness training focused on Essential Skills and employability ▪ Introductory trades training ▪ Safety training and certification (e.g., WHMIS, Working at Heights) ▪ Cultural education and mentorship, including access to Elders ▪ Support connecting with trades unions and employers ▪ Application of learning through hands-on construction project (i.e., sheds)
PTP	Toronto, ON	▪ Curriculum, activities, and workshops focused on self-awareness, managing stress and emotions, relationship skills, and problem-solving ▪ Employment counselling ▪ Self-care and mental health activities, including access to a social worker ▪ Focus on "next steps" following program completion (e.g., goal-setting, connection to other referrals or resources, seeking future funding)
SGEI	Fort Frances, ON Sioux Lookout, ON	▪ Wellness programming (e.g., yoga, meditation, art therapy, counselling) ▪ Cultural and arts-based programming, including language and land-based learning as well as traditional crafts (e.g., moccasins, hand drums, ribbon skirts, medicine bags) ▪ Career and skills exploration (e.g., woodworking, cooking) ▪ Support in completing education (e.g., GED) or obtaining relevant certificates/documentation (e.g., driver's license, safety certificates) ▪ Job application support (e.g., resume-writing, interviewing)
SJLE*	Saint John, NB	▪ Social emotional skills training ▪ One-on-one coaching focused on goal-setting and barriers ▪ Referrals to/connections with other resources and SJLE programs ▪ Classroom modules (e.g., working with others, navigating challenges) – *Power Up* ▪ Community volunteer projects – *Power Up* ▪ On-the-job coaching – *Social enterprises*

*Two SJLE programs/initiatives participated in Women First: 1) Power Up (a 10-week leadership program) and 2) two social enterprises employing SJLE learners.

Approaches to service delivery

While several partners noted that women had historically been overrepresented in their other programs, the Women First project represented most partners' first committed effort to delivering programs specifically targeted to women or with a dedicated gender lens. In this way, the project offered partners a valuable opportunity to grow their knowledge, capacity, and skills when it came to serving multiply-marginalized women, both during the project and in the future. To quote one partner staff, *"we wanted to strive to reach racialized and marginalized women [through Women First]. It's been a challenge that we've experienced for many years, is how to mobilize clients from those communities"* (Futureworx staff).



What was I thinking! *(PTP staff)*

"This photo was taken when I was tree-top trekking with my grandson. This photo is a reminder of what it took to face my fears, to take on a challenge that involved strength and balance, finding out it was much harder than I thought it would be, but pushing through and learning something about myself through the experience. I didn't finish the entire trek. It got too high and too difficult. I got off and found my way down with support. And it was okay. I still felt proud of myself.

Why this photo? For me, it's a reminder of what it takes for [learners] to face fears, take risks, challenge themselves, and move forward on a pathway where they may not feel grounded or safe, and how we as service delivery providers provide the safe space, the training – a way on to a path forward and a way off, if needed – without judgement. [It's about] how we measure or determine success, and how doing your best – and maybe not finishing – can still be framed positively."

In response to a diverse population of learners with unique needs and backgrounds, partners made several thoughtful adaptations to their Women First programs. One key consideration was the selection of Women First staff and program facilitators. Partners sought to fill roles with new and existing team members who were well-suited to build trusting and respectful relationships with participating women. This involved pursuing a diverse staff team that more accurately reflected the learner population. In some cases, this meant an all-woman team for program delivery. More often, it involved staffing programs with individuals whose diverse identities (e.g., gender, Indigeneity, disability) or community connections echoed those of the participants.

Partners also considered ways to ensure their program approaches were responsive to the learners they anticipated serving. A common thread across all partners was their focus on delivering programs underpinned by safety, empowerment, and meeting women where they were at in their journeys. In practice, this took multiple forms, including offering programs in warm, comfortable, and private locations; involving guest speakers and community partners with shared backgrounds and experiences as learners; and engaging facilitators, social workers,

and Elders knowledgeable in trauma- and violence-informed approaches in program delivery, among other strategies.

> *"Safety was number one, and not just physical safety. [It was about] that comfort of feeling like you're in an environment where you're not going to be judged. You're going to be supported. You're going to have that understanding that I think all of us women can relate to, where we feel that people in the workplace don't understand us because they don't have that experience of being a woman or maybe they don't have women in their lives that they're very close to…A woman's story can be very broad. It's not all about being a female and childbirth or having a monthly menstrual. There's so much more…The environment that a women-specific program creates is a level of safety and comfort that really allows women [in the program] to strive to do better."* (Futureworx staff)

While partners pursued diverse approaches to working with and supporting multiply-marginalized women, several common practices, values, and features underpinned their collective approach to delivery and implementation. These included:

- Adopting a learner-centred approach, characterized by meeting learners 'where they're at' and prioritizing trust and relationship-building in programs
- Incorporating cultural safety and relevance, particularly with consideration to Indigenous learners
- Pursuing a strengths-based orientation to program delivery, supporting learners to recognize and gain confidence in their existing skills while developing new ones
- Focusing on social emotional skills within training to support positive employment and other (e.g., health, social) outcomes
- Embracing an expansive understanding of desired program outcomes, including definitions of learner 'success' that are not limited to post-program employment
- Cultivating close relationships with local resources and service providers to facilitate learners' access to wraparound supports (e.g., through referrals to external supports, partnering to offer a specific service)
- Building opportunities for work-integrated learning within programs
- Incorporating learner assessment/reflection and evaluation into programming

Partners similarly described common challenges or constraints in designing and delivering their programs, including in the context of Women First. In particular, they highlighted programs' limited capacity to address the root causes of many of the structural inequities affecting learners, constrained access to long-term and flexible funding opportunities, and the absence or

inaccessibility of appropriate wraparound services as barriers to effective and equitable program delivery.

WOMEN FIRST LEARNERS: A CLOSER LOOK

Learner demographics

In total, 156 participants took part in the Women First project and corresponding evaluation (see Table 2). The vast majority (96 per cent) of Women First participants identified as women. This is perhaps unsurprising given that programs were advertised as being for women and funded through ESDC's Women's Employment Readiness Pilot. In practice, Women First programs welcomed both cisgender and transgender women, as well as non-binary and gender-diverse individuals who applied with knowledge of the programs' gendered emphasis. In a few cases, program staff and learners expressed uncertainty about whether gender-diverse individuals were eligible for programs, as well as how best to support learners who were not cisgender women. This points to the importance of clear messaging from funders and service delivery organizations about who is eligible to participate in funded programs, as well as capacity-building within the sector to better support 2SLGBTQ+ - and particularly gender minority – individuals in employment and skills training programs.

Table 2 Participants per site

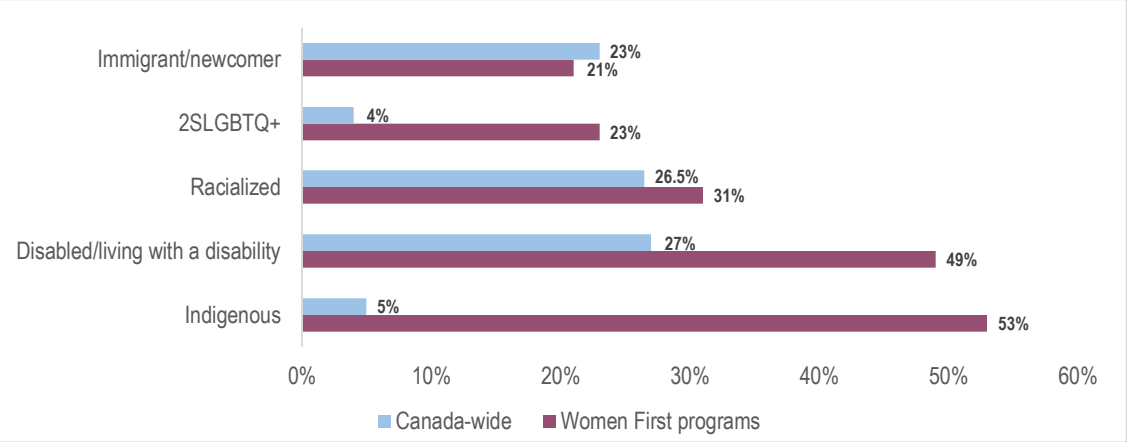
Organization	Number of cohorts	Number of participants
CFBC	3	17
Futureworx	2	24
MBTI	2	28
PTP	2	24
SGEI	3	31
SJLE	N/A (continuous intake)	32

Source: Administrative data

Beyond the (mostly) shared experience of womanhood, participants brought a rich diversity of experiences, expectations, needs, and strengths to Women First programs. Of the participants who shared demographic information, about half indicated that they were Indigenous (53 per cent) or had a disability (49 per cent). Nearly one-third identified as racialized (31 per cent), while over one-fifth were 2SLGBTQ+ (23 per cent) or an immigrant/newcomer to Canada (21

per cent). In other words, Indigenous, disabled, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ participants were disproportionately represented in Women First programs compared to the national average (see Figure 7.

Figure 7 Comparing participant & national demographics



Source: Baseline survey (n=58-120); Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (2024); Statistics Canada (2021, 2023a, 2024); Hou et al. (2023)

Untitled *(Jamie Lee Gehue, Futureworx learner)*

"It is the arbor in my community where our mawiomis are held. I feel it is a powerful place for my people. We dance, pray, socialize, and heal while we are there. It is an indescribable feeling when we are all in our regalia and the drummers are singing.

Mi'kmaq culture is powerful, beautiful, and respectful. We have been through so much and still manage to thrive. Even though others wanted to eradicate us, we are still here, practicing and exercising our rights and traditions. I am resilient and continuing my healing journey as a Mi'kmaq woman. I am breaking cycles and trying to be better as a mom and community member."

Given the nature of where programs were located and who they historically served, sites varied in terms of program audience and design. For example, MBTI, CFBC, and SGEI offered programs exclusively for Indigenous women and integrated more cultural components into their programming in response; meanwhile, PTP served the highest proportion of newcomer women among Women First programs, likely due to its Toronto location. In addition to the diversity of participants across programs, there was also diversity across cohorts within the same program.

One in five participants (20 per cent) identified that they were in education or training immediately prior to their program, with the same proportion reporting that they were employed. In

terms of educational attainment, more than two-thirds of participants had a high school diploma (45 per cent) or less (26 per cent), with 16 per cent and 8 per cent holding a college/trade school diploma or university degree, respectively (n=119). While Women First programs attracted participants of a range of ages, the majority (63 per cent) of learners were between 25 and 44 years old (n=119).

Learner spotlight: *"Rebuilding my life again"*

This spotlight illustrates one participant's journey prior to Women First, navigating mental health struggles, job loss, and isolation, among other challenges. As she explained:

> *"I have had issues with mental health and addiction over the years, and I was just coming through one of them...I left an abusive relationship and had been living in a transition house and was just starting out on my own, rebuilding my life again…Life out there as an adult woman when you are on your own is very isolating."*

Eventually, she moved from transitional housing into an apartment building. In exchange for a discount on rent, she served as a building ambassador and did some cleaning work for the building. The improved housing situation – combined with a new job in the hospitality industry – gave her a sense of renewed confidence. However, she was laid off from this role shortly before joining the Women First program:

> *"I had a job and I was giving it my best, and I felt really good because I had the job. But then I lost the job because apparently there weren't enough hours…It really took a big chunk out of my self-esteem."*

When asked if she had previously accessed or considered seeking support from provincial social assistance programs, she shared that:

> *"I really don't want to. I've had terrible experiences going there. I hate how they make me feel…If I don't have to go there, I won't. They really don't help a person get ahead – not from my experience anyways. Of all the years that I've had to go there, I've had one employment worker that offered to do something for me to help. She offered to buy me a new pair of shoes. Apparently, you can get new shoes through there, but nobody over all the years had ever offered me something like that. And I cried."*

Upon seeing an advertisement for the Women First program, she knew she had to apply:

> *"The night that I got let go, I saw on my Facebook newsfeed the ad for this program. I was probably one of the first people that messaged them, and I kept calling them and texting them."*

She knew that the program had come at the right time: she was eager to continue *"rebuilding [her] life again."*

Factors shaping program experiences

Women First participants and staff spoke persuasively to how a wide range of factors shaped learners' lives before, during, and after programs. This had implications for their sense of community and belonging, access to formal and informal resources, distinct challenges or barriers, and goals during and after the program.

"Some of us are single moms. Some of us come from other communities, so having travel and a place to stay is huge. There's the fear of going into these classroom settings - 'are they going to be nice to us? What is going to be expected of us? Are the instructors going to be caring, kind or harsh, mean, cruel?' It's things like that that we all face. Some of us face lifestyle barriers. Some of us are homeless or in abusive relationships. Some of us don't drive, so getting here is hard. Some of us have never left the reserve before. Some of us are dealing with substance abuse or alcohol abuse." (MBTI participant)

To begin, socio-demographic data indicate that Women First learners were from populations experiencing historical, ongoing, and systemic marginalization linked to sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, Indigeneity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and so forth. Learners' social locations were typically at the intersection of multiple systems of power or oppression (e.g., racism, ableism, poverty), compounding some of the challenges identified here.

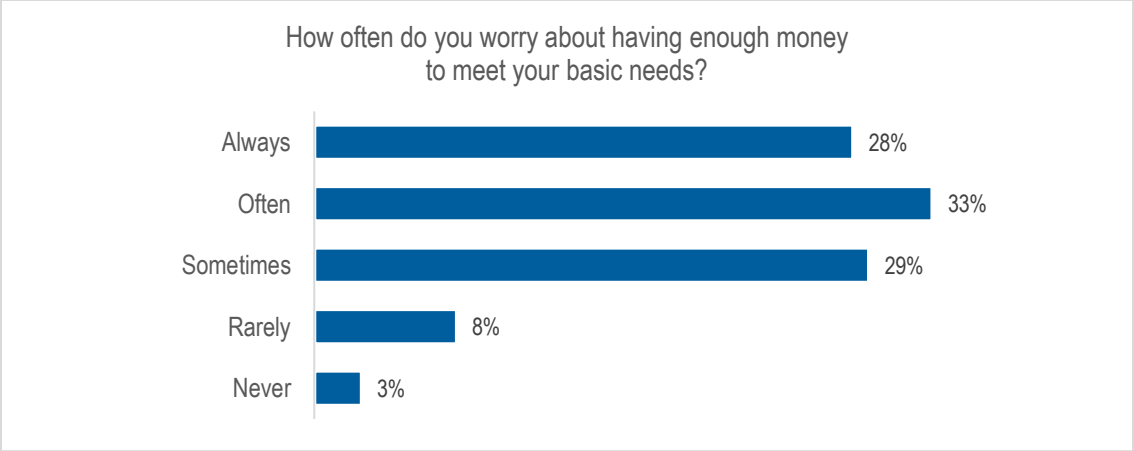
Baseline survey data speak to this further, with over 40 per cent of respondents reporting discrimination or bias in the hiring process as a barrier to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment. Participants also identified discrimination, prejudice, or bias based on particular identities or characteristics, offering additional context for this finding. For instance, nearly 70 per cent of disabled respondents perceived discrimination, prejudice, or bias based on disability, health, or illness as a barrier in their employment journeys. Similar trends emerged for discrimination based on nationality or race, with 67 per cent and 65 per cent of newcomer and racialized respondents reporting this as a barrier, respectively.

Overall, Women First learners had lower levels of formal educational attainment than the national average. While Canada's national high school completion rate for women aged 25-64 is nearly 90 per cent, over a quarter of Women First learners reported not having finished high school (Statistics Canada, 2020). For some, obtaining their high school diploma or equivalent (i.e., GED) was a goal they had been working towards for years. However, many women lacked the time, money, and other resources to complete or pursue further education. Some saw this as having direct implications for their employment prospects:

> *"My disadvantage is, where are you finding a job with a high school education? It's not that I'm not capable: I've had many positions where I grew into good positions. But when you put that on a piece of paper, no one cares in this day and age, and I don't have the money to go to school."* (PTP participant)

Income insecurity was also a widespread challenge among Women First learners, with many describing long-term and severe experiences of poverty. Over half reported worrying about having enough money to meet basic needs 'often' or 'always', with 90 per cent of participants worrying about this at least some of the time (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 Financial stress among learners



Source: Baseline survey (n=120)

Learners and partners attributed this to several factors, including the high cost of living, low wages, and inadequate provincial social or income assistance rates. One partner emphasized the disparity between the minimum and living wage in their community, stating that *"our minimum wage [in Nova Scotia] does not meet a living wage by probably six dollars per hour. When you hear statistics that people cannot afford to work, that is real"* (Futureworx staff). Indeed, the living wage for each community represented in Women First far exceeded the hourly minimum wage set by the province (see Table 3).

Table 3 Living and minimum wage amounts in Women First areas (January 2023)

Partner	Living wage	Minimum wage
CFBC	$20.64 (Dawson Creek) $20.91 (Kamloops)	$15.65
Futureworx	$24.30	$13.60
MBTI	$19.21	$13.50
PTP	$25.05	$15.50
SGEI	$19.80	$15.50
SJLE	$23.35	$13.75

Source: Atcheson (2023); Living Wage Canada (n.d.); Government of Canada (2024a)

The provincial social or income assistance programs on which many women relied also tended to be inadequate to cover even their basic needs, a finding that is consistent with other research in this area (Laidley & Tabbara, 2023a; Sod-Erdene et al., 2019). Beyond issues of adequacy, almost

one-third (29 per cent) of baseline survey respondents identified rules related to other income sources (e.g., social/income assistance clawbacks) as a barrier to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment (n=130).

The COVID-19 pandemic also had detrimental impacts on some participants' financial situations. One participant spoke to their experience with job loss due to the pandemic, and the resulting hardship of this:

> *"During COVID, I lost both of my jobs. I worked in the fitness industry managing a gym and I also did sales…I was on furlough, but I never ended up going back because they said they were closing that place, so my job didn't exist anymore. It was really hard for me because I had been a really hardworking person. I had two to three jobs at certain points in my life because of the lifestyle I wanted, traveling and taking care of myself, all that. Everything happened very fast. I went into a pretty bad depression. It was really difficult for me to deal with it…Months went on and then I got into a really bad position where I couldn't afford to do this anymore. I had no money left and I went on Ontario Works because I was like, 'you know what? At this point, I've paid into it my whole life. I've always had a job. I have to just do this.'"* (PTP participant)

These factors also affected participants' housing situations. Learners underscored the importance of safe, stable, and affordable housing in achieving their goals, both within and outside of programs:

> *"It starts with housing, because if you don't have a safe place to live, then you can't necessarily build on that…If you need to come to the Learning Exchange because you need to work on your high school diploma to better yourself or you want to go to college to further your education – if you don't have a home base, everything else is hard. If you don't have financial stability to sustain your home base, then it doesn't work either."* (SJLE participant)

Come in, it's safe *(Chelsey Hovey, SJLE learner)*

"This is the front door of my apartment. My home is very important to me. It is my sanctuary. Full-time employment does not equate to stability in shelter. If not for this program's help, I would have been homeless with an excellent job. I value having a home where I don't have to worry about eviction. I'm quiet about the struggles I still have. Silence does not mean I'm living 'the dream.'"

While most learners reported living in relatively stable housing, nearly a quarter (22 per cent) reported more precarious situations (e.g., couch surfing, emergency shelter) at the beginning of their programs. Just half of baseline survey respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their housing at that time (n=79). 45 per cent reported that housing-related challenges (e.g., access to affordable housing, housing insecurity) had been a barrier in their employment journeys (n=132). In interviews, several women

elaborated on their past and ongoing challenges with unsafe, inappropriate, or unaffordable housing: *"Kamloops is so expensive…[Living with family] is only temporary until I'm done this course…I still consider myself homeless because I don't have a home. That's been really, really difficult for me"* (CFBC participant).

Research also shows the relationship between poverty, mental health, and employment, whereby "stressful living conditions associated with poverty…increase the likelihood of mental health disorders and career disengagement" (Clark & Bower, 2016, p. 374). This was echoed in the evaluation findings, with participants reporting multiple sources and high frequencies of stress upon joining Women First programs, in addition to widespread mental health struggles (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 Self-reported stress: How stressful are most days according to participants?

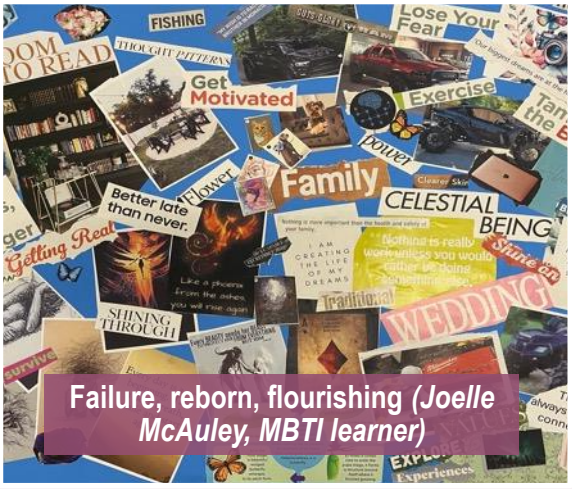
Source: Baseline survey (n=128)

Participants and staff also spoke to the role of trauma in the lives of Women First learners, including intergenerational trauma (e.g., colonial violence and the lasting impact of residential schools), environmental trauma (e.g., displacement and other consequences from wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and other climate-related events), or trauma arising from gender-based, intimate partner, or community violence. In interviews, staff from various sites elaborated on how these and other forms of trauma manifested among participants, as well as the actual or potential implications for programming:

> *"[The examples in the curriculum] also unpacked a lot of trauma that came up…[Participants were] coming up with all the reasons why this person [in the example] might have anxiety about leaving their child at daycare. Historically, [Indigenous] children have been taken away at daycare, and it was probably renamed 'residential school' and it wasn't a safe place…It helped opened my eyes to the reality of Indigenous people coming in to utilize things that might always be done in a very, white Eurocentric way."* (CFBC staff)
>
> *"[Trauma] is coming up daily in some way…For example, we have [a staff member] who is female and [another staff member with the same name] who is male. [We] initially thought the female was going to be the one cleaning the room where we have the program, but it*

> *was actually the male. One participant was very triggered and upset about this and having a male in the space [even when we weren't in the classroom]. Now have bins for everyone to put their things in and keep them there."* (SGEI staff)

In addition to the personal experiences of Women First learners, broader community contexts and histories also shaped the presence of trauma within programs. For example, learners and staff in Blueberry River First Nations - one of CFBC's delivery sites - were required to evacuate the area midway through the program due to the threat of nearby wildfires (CBC News, 2023). Meanwhile, Truro – the community where Futureworx is located – had endured several hardships leading up to the Women First program. In addition to the damage caused by Hurricane Fiona in September 2022, the area has been profoundly affected by the 2020 mass shooting in which a gunman tragically took the lives of 22 people in Colchester, Cumberland, and Hants counties. The subsequent public inquiry cited a "public health emergency" in the province due to unmet mental health needs (Ryan, 2023).



Failure, reborn, flourishing *(Joelle McAuley, MBTI learner)*

"Before joining this program, I was a stay at home mom for several years. Recently [my partner and I] separated. I was torn, broken, beaten, and not in a good place. Every day was a struggle. I dropped out of my business admin program because I couldn't handle travelling back-and-forth and taking care of four kids. That is a part of my life that shaped me.

I joined the program and figured it [would] help with my personal growth [and] give me experience and skills. I also needed a job that pays. As I navigate my new life with my kids there have been several trial and errors. We are learning to love ourselves [and] let things go, doing what we like, unlearning toxic behaviour, being gentle with ourselves, doing more activities. My goal is to be able to provide my kids with a happy, loving, healthy mom who can provide for them, and this program is giving me the knowledge, skills, and experience to be able to do that…You can rebuild your life from the bricks thrown at you."

Barriers to accessing mental health supports or services – despite the identified need – were raised repeatedly by Women First learners and staff. This further perpetuated cycles of disadvantage and stress, with one staff member noting, *"there's not a lot of free or subsidized mental health support unless you're in crisis"* (PTP staff). Despite the value of certain existing practices or services (e.g., counselling coverage through social assistance, sliding scale payment options), both participants and staff agreed that these were often insufficient to meet the complex, individualized needs of Women First learners. Many participants reported that even when services were available, long waitlists made them inaccessible. This was particularly true for ongoing or long-term counselling or therapy:

> *"People told me places to go, but all of them have waitlists and you're waiting months, which makes it hard. I've been waiting probably since last year…They do have different counselors when you absolutely need to go talk to them, but sometimes you don't want to get to that point where you're breaking down and bawling before you can go see someone."* (SGEI participant)

All told, the diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences of Women First collectively shaped their experiences before, during, and after their programs in a multitude of ways.

Learner spotlight: *"I became so untethered that I couldn't find my centre"*

This spotlight documents the experience of one Women First learner who was laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic and, despite high level levels of formal education, could not find subsequent employment. Her reflections on job loss, social assistance programs, and the role of confidence are shared below, edited for brevity and readability.

"I was hired during the COVID-19 pandemic and laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was hired in a management position at an NGO, so I worked with an organization that served the Black community. But as usual, these types of organizations come with funding attached, so most times the contract is temporary, so if you lose your funding – that was the end of that position.

Prior to going back to school, I worked for years in the banking industry, so my previous experience was a lot different. This level of unemployment was new, to say the least. As I told my employment service provider, my challenge was not qualifications. My challenge was after going to a school, getting a job, getting laid off…it was such a shock to my confidence. It was causing so much anxiety and stress.

When my employment insurance ended, I went on Ontario Works. I think sometimes when you're working with Ontario Works, you feel like everything is just a pressure to get back to work without understanding what this human is dealing with. What does it take to get them back to work healthy and whole so that they could survive work, right?

The challenge between dealing with that system and the fact that a job was not readily available became such a stressful thing that after a while, I pretty much gave up. I had just Ontario Works income, which is not income. So that created a combination of hardship that I've never experienced and led to stress that I've never felt. I felt so frustrated and at the end of my rope, because it wasn't like I wasn't sending out my résumé.

I didn't know what these pandemic years did to me, it just…I became so untethered that I couldn't find my centre. It's like I would get up and try for a minute and then get beaten and then go back and then after a while, I found myself just lying down and refusing to get up.

I didn't necessarily need additional computer courses or something like that. What I needed was a program that helped support me to build back that confidence, to deal with the job search. When I started the program, I never came in here thinking that I'm going to get a job. I was hoping to be able to work on those core pieces that I felt were deflated, defeated, missing, died out, burned out during this pandemic, to be able to energize myself back."

(RE)DEFINING PROGRAM SUCCESS

"My vision board shows what I want for myself for the future: being in the forest in a house by the water, growing vegetables and fruits, making time to travel, and to always keep learning. Wanting to be happy and at peace in nature. It's the small things that make a big difference overall."

The accounts of those involved in the Women First project highlight the importance of rethinking how we conceptualize program success, especially for multiply-marginalized learners. Traditional, uniform notions of success often fail to capture the diverse and individualized experiences of participants. Instead, findings from Women First underscore the need for expansive, flexible, and personalized definitions of 'successful' or 'positive' outcomes within employment and skills training programs, where success reflects the unique contexts, journeys, wants, and needs of each learner.

While there is often a focus on the struggles and obstacles encountered by the groups represented among Women First learners – a perspective we have also engaged here – learners' participation in and completion of Women First programs is itself a testament to their adaptability, perseverance, and strength. For many Women First participants, achievement in programs was not just about reaching a predetermined endpoint, but about personal growth and development – demonstrated through consistent attendance, learning more about themselves, gaining confidence, feeling empowered, and deepening their connections to their community and culture. For those whose notions of success included securing employment by the end of their program, this achievement was about more than just making ends meet; it reflected women's desire for a stable, well-paying job that aligns with their interests, goals, and experience while supporting their health and well-being.

Women First partners echoed this sentiment, emphasizing their role in providing the space, time, stability, structure, and resources necessary for learners to define and pursue success on their own terms. As one partner summarized, *"it is so important to get to know each individual so that you can see and meet them at their point of success and not just judge everybody based on the same thing"* (Futureworx staff). This approach recognizes the importance of supporting each learner according to their unique needs and goals. The following quotes from learners and staff further illustrate this approach and its implications in the Women First project:

> *"[Success] differs for each individual. For some of them, it's just getting them here…We have had many students say they couldn't walk through the door because it brings back memories of when they attended high school…For us, that's a success. They made it in."*

(SGEI staff)

"I think just going to [the program], I feel successful already. Because I have signed up to start with, and then I have been going and continuing to attend, and I am going to finish through to the end. Just to say, 'hey, I did it!'… That's huge for me because to me, this is a long-term program - even though it's probably not considering [the length of] post-secondary or something - But still, to me, this is a long program. To make that commitment, it was a huge step." (CFBC participant)

"We're trying to help everybody get to a place of success, and that doesn't always look the same for everybody…Not everybody is going to leave this program to start a full-time job on Monday, but that doesn't mean that they were all not successful. Everybody had to meet a different point based on their own lives, their own experiences, and what success looks like for them." (Futureworx staff)

"What I'm working on now since I'm in the program is building a consistent routine so that when I transition from here, I don't fall back into the depression. Just to be able to have routine." (PTP participant)

"I find the outcomes and successes may not be what the government or funder sees on paper as success. I've seen the women grow so much. That may not be that they got a job, but they've done so much growth which can lead to success in employment eventually. [There are] so many successes that aren't employment-related but are successes in how they move forward in their life in general." (SGEI staff)

"I'm hoping to be able to leave the program with a better sense of what I want in life and not what other people want for me, because I spent my whole life living my life to make other people happy…I'm done living up to other peoples' expectations…so I'm hoping to learn more about myself and what my expectations for myself are." (SJLE participant)

"I definitely want to get into a trade and start working. My biggest goal is to get a job – one where I stay employed. Stable employment. Pipe fitters and plumbing has a lot of work that's available in my area, so I can stay close to my kids. There's always a demand for it, so that's great." (MBTI participant)

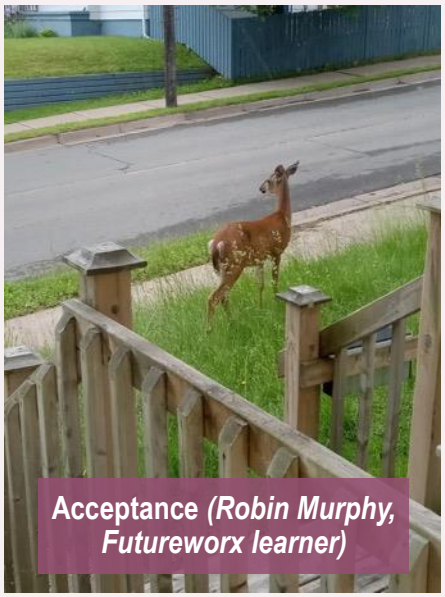
"For me, [success is] about confidence and feeling confident. I feel like [the participants] have so many skills that they don't recognize. So that's what I see my job as: there are 11 weeks to help them identify all the skills they do have [and] all the things they can do." (PTP staff)

"Everything here is individualized, and so everyone's success looks different…it's not just about getting a job. It's about talking to people to work through what's going to work for them…For some people it is a job…There's one woman who came every day and is really struggling with her recovery from addiction and a lot of challenges in her life, and for her to

> *come every day and complete a program is 1,000% success for her."* (SJLE staff)
>
> *"I would just feel happy being able to successfully make it through the whole program."* (Participant survey response)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

All told, the Women First project offers compelling evidence about the importance of attending to the broader context of participants' lives, both in the design and evaluation of employment and skills training programs. The evaluation findings demonstrate that partners operated within a highly complex environment, exemplified both in the broader social and community contexts and in the lives of participating learners. The diverse and intersecting challenges faced by Women First learners – including exposure to structural inequities, systemic oppression, income and housing insecurity, and the profound impact of trauma – collectively shaped their experiences before, during, and after the programs. These factors fundamentally influenced the way programs were designed, delivered, and experienced, adding considerable complexity to partners' work.



Acceptance *(Robin Murphy, Futureworx learner)*

"This is a young deer standing in front of my house. To me, it represents a strength and familiarity that the deer has…[and] the strength of the deer to live and survive in the world. It's showing no fear, but it's cautious of the human presence.

Before the program I let my fear, anxiety, and all-around life experiences hold me down and hold me back. The program showed me I was resilient, stronger and smarter than I thought, and to keep on keeping on despite my circumstances."

Responsive programming for multiply-marginalized women in Women First required more than just targeted recruitment efforts. It necessitated tailoring programs to reflect the diversity and complexity of learners' lives, and ensuring that appropriate supports were available for those coping with poverty, trauma, and so forth. This suggests that to meaningfully support those who stand to benefit the most from employment and training programs, service provider organizations must be equipped with adequate resources to navigate these complexities and adopt an expansive understanding of program success, informed by the experiences and perspectives of the learners themselves. These findings also underscore the critical importance of comprehensive, accessible, and responsive social policies and services in enabling multiply-marginalized women to thrive – in training programs, employment, and the rest of their lives.

"I'M EAGER TO LEARN MORE": EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS

As previously described, women face multiple and systemic barriers to their engagement and success in training and employment, particularly women who face multiple forms of marginalization. In this context, Women First partners – including the evaluation team – understood employment readiness and success in pre-employment training as extending beyond simply finding a job. Indeed, a focus on work, rather than *meaningful or high-quality work* (and the factors to achieve this), can perpetuate systemic inequities for multiply-marginalized women: "Immediate labor-force attachment produces little or no change in the social and economic structure of the workplace or in the larger society with respect to race-ethnicity, class, and gender and provides a large pool of low-wage workers" (Bok, 2004, p. 1). Moreover, women are often over-represented in lower-paying sectors, more precarious work that is part-time and temporary, and jobs with fewer opportunities for promotion and career advancement (Auclair-Ouellet et al., 2022).

Recognizing this context, the programs delivered by service delivery partners in Women First focused on building women's confidence and self-esteem. They fostered foundational and transferable skills that can benefit women in their daily lives and help them work towards their individual life, education, and employment goals. In particular, all partners targeted social emotional skills and integrated a new curriculum focused on adaptability and collaboration from Canada's Skills for Success framework. While supporting personal growth, these skills have also been shown to be important for employability (Government of Canada, 2024b; Palameta et al., 2021). All programs also included enhanced wraparound supports to enable women to take care of themselves and their families, while also having the time and space to build their skills and explore their goals. Overall, partners took a holistic approach to programming, fostering relationships, inclusion, and belonging. Although it was not always learners' primary goal, programs nevertheless promoted employability by increasing skills in career exploration and job search, offering occupation-specific training where appropriate, providing work placements, and connecting women to job opportunities.

This section focuses on Women First learners' employment journeys, beginning with the goals, motivations, and experiences that brought them to their respective programs. This is followed by highlights of key program components that supported employability, and skills and employment-based outcomes reported by participants.

"The first photo shows a recently planted flower struggling to survive. It shows my struggle to join the job market in Canada. I tried to have [a job] for the last two years and found out how hard it is. I think there are many people struggling out there. It is very important to organize such a program."

"[The second photo] is a beautiful flower that I have been taking care of for months. It reflects my current state: a happy person with a bright future. I now have a job. This happiness is not only because I have income but also [because] it will allow me to integrate with the community. I believe this photo reflects the impact the training program has brought in my life."

EMPLOYMENT JOURNEYS OF WOMEN FIRST LEARNERS

Participants in Women First programs tended to be further removed from the labour market, reflecting the multiple and intersecting barriers that women – particularly those with multiple marginalized identity characteristics or challenging life experiences – face. Many women shared challenges related to balancing employment or career progression with caregiving responsibilities (i.e., for children, partners, other family members) and other forms of unpaid yet essential labour that is disproportionately performed by women (Gladu, 2021). For some women, years of enduring and navigating frustrating, disheartening, and exploitative circumstances had taken a toll on their confidence, motivation, and self-esteem. Many reported health challenges, high levels of stress, and extensive self-doubt that further exacerbated the difficulty of finding dignified, well-compensated, and stable employment.

34% of baseline survey respondents reported high self-esteem at the beginning of their program

Despite these challenges, participants entered Women First programs with hope, grit, and tenacity. Some had specific employment or educational goals, while others were focused on

building confidence, self-advocacy skills, relationships, a sense of routine, future plans, or forward momentum. For many, wraparound supports played an important role in their decision to enrol, providing space for women to pursue their goals without sacrificing much-needed support.

> *"I want to be more confident with my choices and to feel better about myself. I really want to go back to school."* (Participant survey response)
>
> *"I want to have more self-compassion and gain the ability to use my voice when I'm uncomfortable."* (Participant survey response)

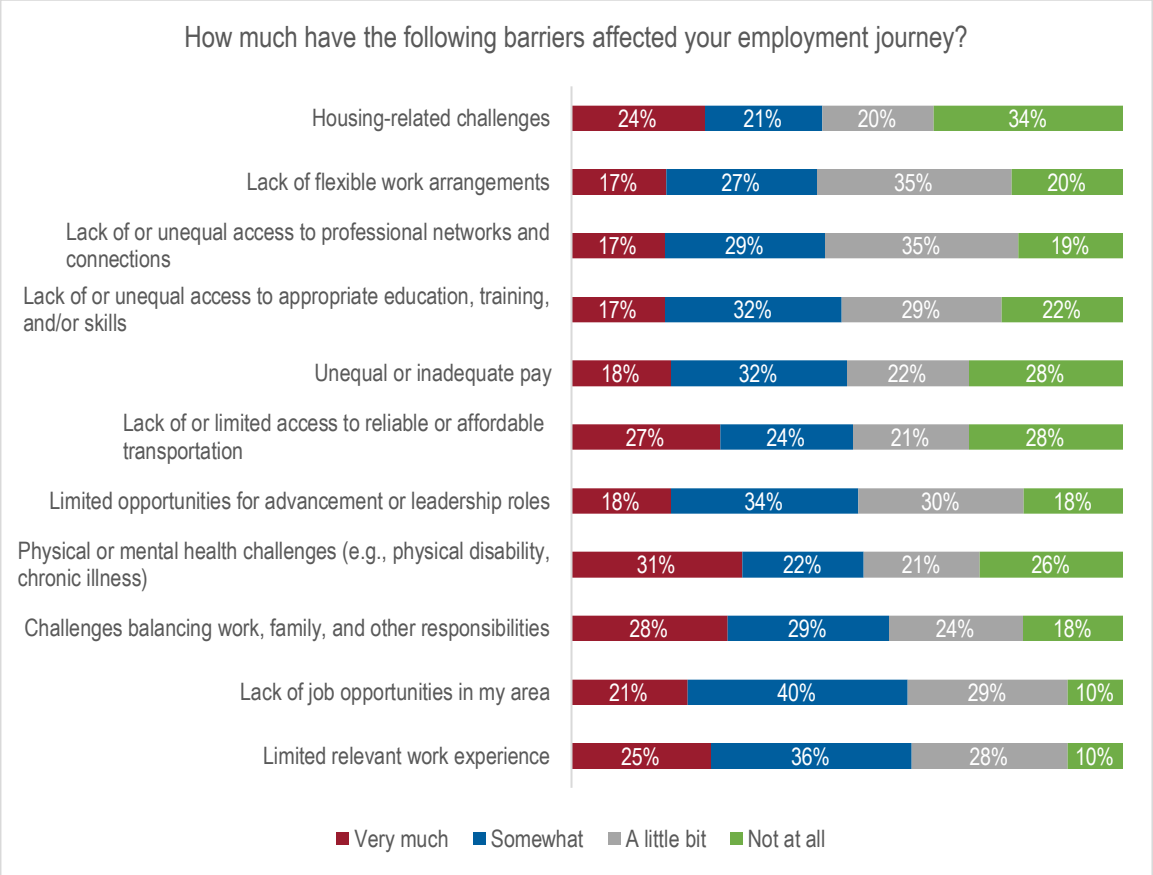
While one in five participants were employed at the start of their programs, the majority (90 per cent) reported having previous paid work experience in a range of sectors, most commonly in sales and services (43 per cent) and tourism and hospitality (12 per cent). However, the jobs in which women had worked previously were often positions with limited opportunities for career advancement. Of those with prior work experience (n=109-111), just over a third reported satisfaction with job security (35 per cent) and opportunities for growth (36 per cent) at their most recent job. Less than half were satisfied with their wages (46 per cent). Further, multivariate and regression analyses showed that racialized participants reported lower job satisfaction than non-racialized participants; there were no differences in job satisfaction found between other demographic groups.

Seasons of change
(Futureworx learner)

"[This] is a picture of a lot of different things. Trees represent changing seasons, growth, deep roots that ground us during hard times. They provide shelter and a home for some animals. They bring stress relief to look at or sit under. This has been a season of change for me, going to this course and getting ready to get back into the workforce after my accident. There has been lots of support through this program."

Women First participants reported experiencing a range of barriers to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment. These include barriers related to employment readiness and capital (e.g., experience, education, role models, professional networks), the quality of available job opportunities (e.g., pay, flexibility, benefits, opportunities for advancement), access to resources and material wellbeing (e.g., income/housing/food insecurity, access to childcare), and those related to discrimination, lack of inclusivity, or inadequate accommodations. Figure 10 illustrates the most frequently reported barriers affecting participants' employment journeys.

Figure 10 Top reported barriers affecting participants' employment journeys



Source: Baseline survey (n=125-130)

Women spoke to how physical and mental health challenges exacerbated other barriers in their employment journeys, particularly in the absence of adequate financial, health, or social support. While almost half of Women First learners identified as disabled, others reported chronic health issues without identifying as having a disability. Many chronic pain, trauma-related (e.g., complex post-traumatic stress disorder), and other health issues (e.g., endometriosis, fibromyalgia) are not formally recognized as disabilities and may not qualify women for disability-related social supports or workplace accommodations (Vick & Lightman, 2010). As one learner shared, these unrecognized health challenges can limit employment opportunities:

> *"From what I see as an applicant to jobs, there doesn't seem to be much acknowledgement or support for those who aren't exactly disabled, but have health concerns that might prevent them from performing at 100% all the time, [and] who still want to find some employment and contribute to their household."* (Participant survey response)

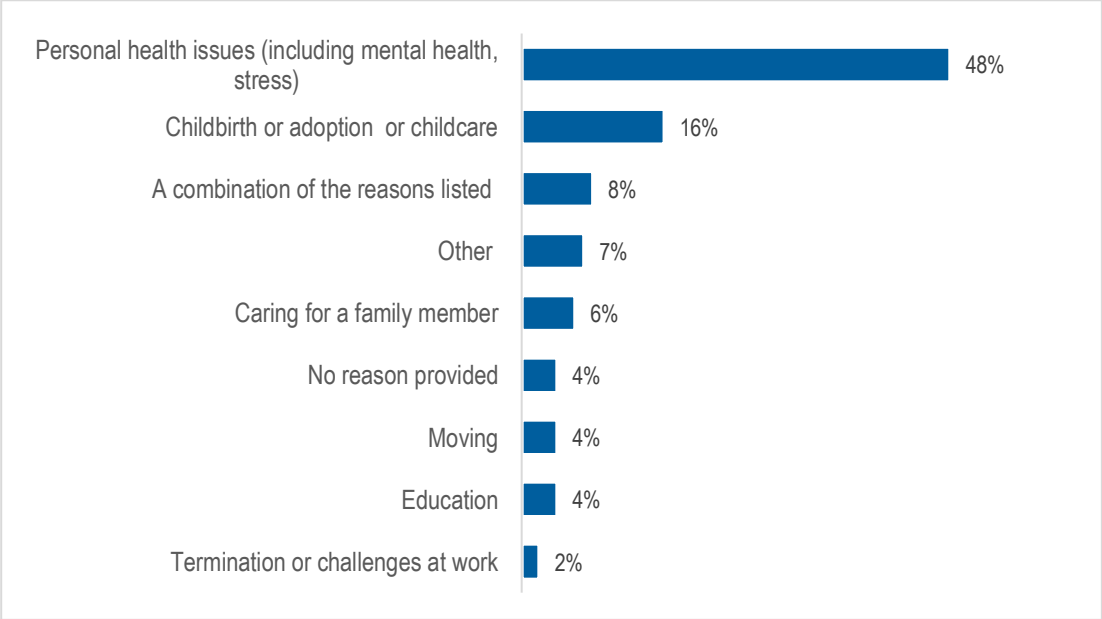
Other participants shared how their caregiving responsibilities and the division of labour in their households had conflicted with their ability to pursue further education or paid employment.

These challenges may be further intensified in systemically marginalized and under-resourced communities:

> *"For the last 20 years I was a stay-at-home mom, dedicating my life to him [domestic partner] and the kids…I had a few jobs - Boston Pizza, reception, cleaning, odds and ends, but I was a stay-at-home mom. It just made more sense that I didn't work rather than have to pay for bus passes, work attire, that stuff…When we broke up, I was halfway through my business administration degree for accounting. I dropped out; I couldn't deal. I was trying to find a job, but finding a job on the reserve is hard - even living on a reserve is hard."* (MBTI participant)

Women are much more likely to experience career interruptions than men, which can limit career advancement and pose challenges when attempting to return to the labour market (e.g., outdated experience, skills not formally recognized) (Moyser, 2017). In the context of Women First, three-quarters of baseline survey respondents reported taking a break or pause in employment at some point in their careers (n=119). Among these individuals, about two-thirds (64 per cent) indicated that their most recent employment break lasted longer than six months, with 44 per cent reporting a break extending beyond one year (n=86).

Figure 11 Reason provided for most recent career interruption



Source: Baseline survey (n=89)

While women cited a range of factors contributing to career interruptions, nearly half (48 per cent) identified personal health issues as the main contributor to their most recent break in employment (see Figure 11). Further, many participants reported feeling pressured to return work despite ongoing health challenges - either by employers or due to financial need – with negative consequences for their wellbeing. As one participant shared:

> *"After the sudden death of my father, my previous employer was pressuring me to return before I was ready. Being part-time, they used that as leverage to force me back. I was denied long-term disability, and because I refused to return, I was terminated. Mental health needs to be taken very seriously in the workplace. An employer should not have the right to dictate your grieving process or put a timeline on it."* (Participant survey response)

Women First learners also cited childbirth, adoption, or childcare (16 per cent) as well as other family caregiving responsibilities (6 per cent) as reasons for past career interruptions, highlighting the essential and labour-intensive nature of unpaid caring work which is disproportionately performed by women (Luxton, 2021).

Participants typically characterized career interruptions as a negative experience, in part due to the shame and stress associated with *"the feeling of being a failure when unemployed"* (participant survey response). This also impacted on individuals' motivation to return to paid, formal work; as one learner shared, *"it is hard to return to the workplace…[there is] fear of judgment, added stress when thinking about it"* (participant survey response).

However, not all experiences of career interruptions were viewed negatively. A minority (15 per cent) of Women First learners described these breaks as somewhat or very positive. For some women, a break from employment offered a chance to escape a harmful work environment and reflect on their expectations for safer, more inclusive workplaces in the future:

> *"I had to quit my job due to the stress and burnout. The given time helped me to reflect, learn self-care strategies, and be more aware for my next employment journey…For newcomer employees the workplace should be more friendly and less stressful and provide them with training and orientations to make things…easier."* (Participant survey response)

For others, these breaks allowed them to prioritize their mental health and care for themselves. Several participants expressed a desire for shorter-term employment pauses to be normalized and made more accessible:

> *"Taking breaks is very good for my mental health, but when it comes to financial support, it is not good."* (Participant survey response)
>
> *"They should be more available. Mental health breaks for 2-4 weeks could help with burn out."* (Participant survey response)

WHAT PARTNERS DID

Program & training highlights

Recognizing learner needs, program staff placed an emphasis on flexible, inclusive, and individualized goals related to employment and skills. They focused on building confidence, capacity, and skills to creating conditions for learners to identify and pursue next steps that they identified as important. This was often - but not always – related to gaining employment. While partners shared broad similarities in their target audiences and desired outcomes, approaches to offering programming differed widely, including program elements specifically focused on skill-building and employability. The diversity of program content and delivery approaches reflected different strengths and priorities of partner organizations, the needs of their learners, and the local context. Just a few of these approaches are described here.

CFBC's program had learners obtain their drone certifications, connecting women with a growing industry and opportunities for remote work or employment in their local communities. The certification was a large draw for many women. In later cohorts, CFBC responded to emerging interests reported by learners, offering an entrepreneurship course and a certification in the film industry.

At SGEI, learners were given opportunities to explore different cultural and technical skills (e.g., working in woodshop, sewing cultural pieces, arranging flowers). One participant elaborated:

> *"We did rattle making, we did our moccasins that we're doing now, we made our skirts, we made our drum bags, we made our drum, and then we also made a ceremony blanket…I really appreciated that we had the opportunity to make all of these things…to take home and take some of those teachings and maybe even share it…I'm really glad that those were offered because I would have never made those at home."* (SGEI participant)

Land-based learning
(SGEI staff)

"What you're looking at here are Ojibwe Spirit Horses. They're a smaller and furrier breed, and ideal companions. I wanted to share this photo because working with these particular horses, one learns how to care, lead, ride. To do this involves trust - trusting the horse and trusting oneself. Respect and patience are also being built here, as well as confidence

By implementing land-based learning, women are connecting land to learning, which is so important. We found there was greater connection, attendance, and excitement when we took this trip. Bringing an endangered species of [learners'] ancestors back to [them], that was really important…Relating to the horse, connecting to the past, bringing healing. Women were calm, patient."

MBTI provided skills exploration and development in the skilled trades, providing women with tools and training in a range of construction trades. Both SGEI and MBTI connected learners with local employers, which resulted in employment for some women following the program. Similarly, Futureworx coordinated work placements for learners with local employers, in some cases leading to participants gaining employment at the end of their programs.

At SJLE, Women First participants employed with the social enterprises had opportunities to apply the social emotional skills targeted through the program directly in their work. Program facilitators were also able to use real-life examples from the social enterprises in the training. Meanwhile, PTP contracted a dedicated skills instructor for their programming, who drew on the Skills for Success and other curricula to engage with learners alongside sessions on specific digital and life skills, including those identified by learners (e.g., using specific computer software/programs, income tax filing).

Skills for Success

In addition to the unique aspects described above, all programs delivered Skills for Success training to support learners' development of social emotional skills. For the purposes of Women First, Skills for Success curriculum and resources focusing on adaptability and collaboration were developed by project partner AWES and provided to program sites.

There were varying levels of uptake of this curriculum among partners, based on the perceived relevance for different groups of learners and the existing capacity for delivering Skills for Success training across organizations. For example, MBTI chose to implement pre-existing social emotional skills training that had been developed specifically with Indigenous learners in mind. In other cases, the curriculum and related activities were adopted – and often adapted – to meet learner needs while aligning with existing training components. The abbreviated project timeline compared to the original project workplan also meant that some partners were unable to integrate the curriculum into their first cohorts, and instead adapted preexisting curriculum to fill in these gaps.

Some programs shared concerns about the cultural relevance or the suitability of the Skills for Success curriculum for different populations of learners, including those with varying existing skill levels. This finding highlights the challenges and risks of implementing general curricula for diverse groups of learners, and the importance of providing adequate time and resources for training organizations to either develop curricula or tailor existing resources to better respond to their learners' needs.

EMPLOYABILITY & SKILLS OUTCOMES

The intentional effort to create programs in which women could focus on skill development in a safe and supported environment resulted in significant skill gains and improvements in wellbeing. Participants reported significantly higher career adaptability skills, social emotional skills, and digital skills following Women First programs.

How I feel towards the future
(Futureworx learner)

"The colours represent my feelings towards the future. At the beginning of this program I sort of had an idea of what I wanted my future to look like, but now I have set goals for my future. I'm hopefully going back for my grade 12 in September at Nova Scotia Community College, and then I'm going to try to get into NSCC for my Early Childhood Education degree. I have a bright future ahead of me. This program has made me come a long way from where I was in the beginning."

Career adaptability

The evaluation sought to capture changes in several areas related to career adaptability, including career decision-making self-efficacy (i.e., participants' confidence in their ability to assess their skills and interests, engage with professionals in their desired field, and make informed career choices), job search clarity (i.e., participants' understanding of their career goals and desired job type), and job search efficacy (i.e., participants' confidence in their ability to perform key job search activities such networking, writing resumes, or conducting interviews).

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess if there were significant gains in career adaptability skills during the program period (comparing baseline and post-program scores) and if these gains were maintained over time (comparing baseline and follow-up scores). Women First participants reported significant gains across all measures of career adaptability, and retained these gains in the follow-up period (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4 Career adaptability: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – post-program)

	Baseline mean	Post-program mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Job search self-efficacy	2.86	3.41	0.55	***	0.000	97
Job search clarity	3.16	3.67	0.51	***	0.000	97
Career decision-making self-efficacy	3.08	3.53	0.45	***	0.000	95

Source: Baseline and post-program survey

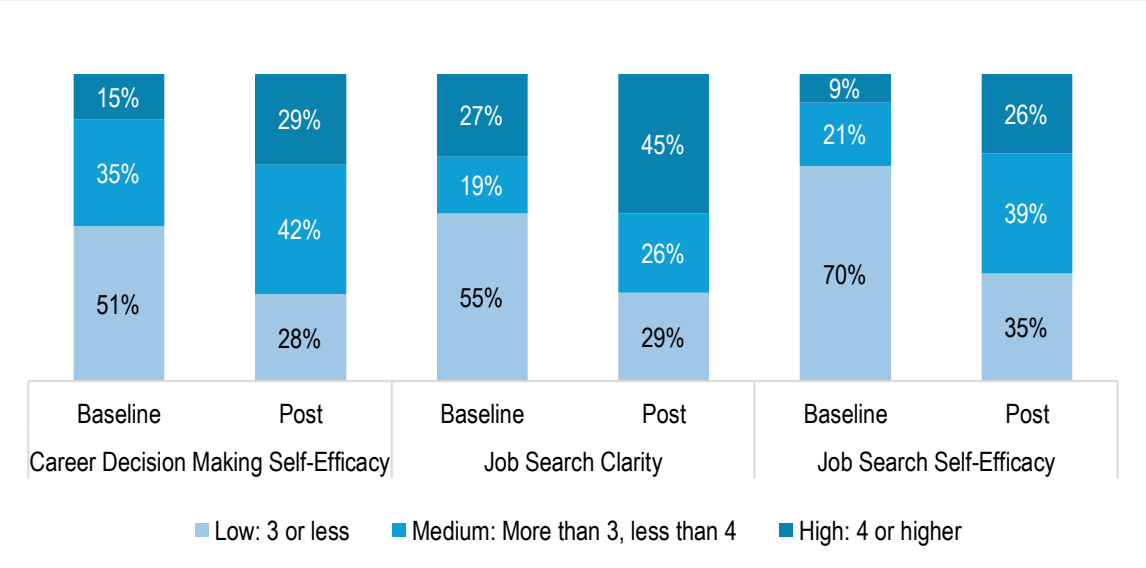
Table 5 Career adaptability: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – follow-up)

	Baseline mean	Post-Follow-up mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Job search self-efficacy	2.73	3.10	0.36	**	0.003	41
Job search clarity	3.09	3.59	0.49	**	0.004	43
Career decision-making self-efficacy	2.97	3.38	0.41	**	0.008	43

Source: Baseline and follow-up survey

Comparing baseline and post-program surveys, the proportion of respondents who reported low scores across career adaptability measures (i.e., less than 3 on a 5-point scale) decreased substantially, from a range of 51 per cent to 70 per cent at baseline to a range of 28 per cent to 35 per cent post-program. The largest gain was in job search self-efficacy skills, where the proportion of participants who reported high skills (i.e., 4 or more on a 5-point scale) increased by 18 percentage points, from 27 per cent at baseline to 45 per cent post-program (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 Distribution of career adaptability skills (baseline – post-program)



Source: Baseline and post-program survey (n=95-97)

In the follow-up survey, respondents were significantly less likely to identify "lack of job opportunities in my area" as a barrier in their employment journeys compared to the baseline survey. While this finding does not discount the structural and systemic nature of this barrier – particularly its relevance to women – it does suggest that the career adaptability skills gained through Women First programs may have positively influenced participants' perceptions of the

employment opportunities available to them. Moreover, learners in some programs gained additional sector or occupation-specific skills that they believed enhanced their employability:

> *"I'm coming out of [the program] with the knowledge: how to build things, how to build anything. I know how to wire a light switch and a conductor. I know the different types of wires we use. With plumbing, how to take apart a sink, how to put it back together, how to take apart a toilet and get it back together..."* (MBTI participant)

Skills for Success

Another set of paired sample t-tests assessed the significance of change in social emotional skills. Participants reported significant gains in social emotional skills from baseline to post-program. These gains were retained during the follow-up period, although there was some decrease in self-reported skills between the post-program and follow-up surveys (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6 Skills for Success: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – post-program)

	Baseline mean	Post-program mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Social emotional skills	**3.19**	**3.53**	**0.34**	*******	**0.000**	**101**
Adaptability – Adjusting	3.30	3.74	0.44	***	0.000	100
Adaptability – Goal regulation	3.14	3.52	0.38	***	0.000	101
Adaptability – Confidence regulation	3.03	3.41	0.38	***	0.000	98
Adaptability – Stress regulation	2.56	2.93	0.37	***	0.000	101
Adaptability – Self reflection	3.22	3.56	0.34	***	0.000	98
Collaboration – Teamwork	3.75	4.01	0.26	***	0.000	100
Adaptability – Responsibility management	3.42	3.60	0.18	*	0.014	100
Digital skills	**3.23**	**3.65**	**0.42**	*******	**0.000**	**99**

Source: Baseline and post-program survey

Table 7 Skills for Success: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – follow-up)

	Baseline mean	Follow-up mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Social emotional skills	**3.22**	**3.40**	**0.18**	*	**0.015**	**45**
Adaptability – Adjusting	3.26	3.50	0.23	*	0.038	45
Adaptability – Goal regulation	3.10	3.31	0.22	*	0.050	45
Adaptability – Confidence regulation	3.02	3.26	0.23	*	0.036	44
Adaptability – Stress regulation	2.57	2.89	0.31	**	0.009	45
Adaptability – Self reflection	3.38	3.54	0.16		0.235	44
Collaboration – Teamwork	3.72	3.84	0.12		0.107	43
Adaptability – Responsibility management	3.54	3.54	-0.01		0.930	45
Digital skills	**3.35**	**3.46**	**0.11**		**0.2725**	**43**

Source: Baseline and follow-up survey

As shown in Figure 13, the proportion of participants who reported high (i.e., 4 or more on a 5-point scale) Skills for Success increased across every skill and facet measured. The proportion of participants who reported high digital skills increased by 22 percentage points, from 21 per cent in the baseline survey to 43 per cent in the post-program survey. In interviews, learners commented on the opportunities they had to build digital skills, particularly in the programs delivered by CFBC, SGEI, and PTP:

> *"The computer skills were really different. I thought I knew everything about computers...but once we started to go through the courses in the workshops and stuff, I was like, 'that's so different, it's an eye-opener.' [The program] taught me Microsoft Word and Excel and how to [manage]...email and stuff. It helped me a lot."* (CFBC participant)

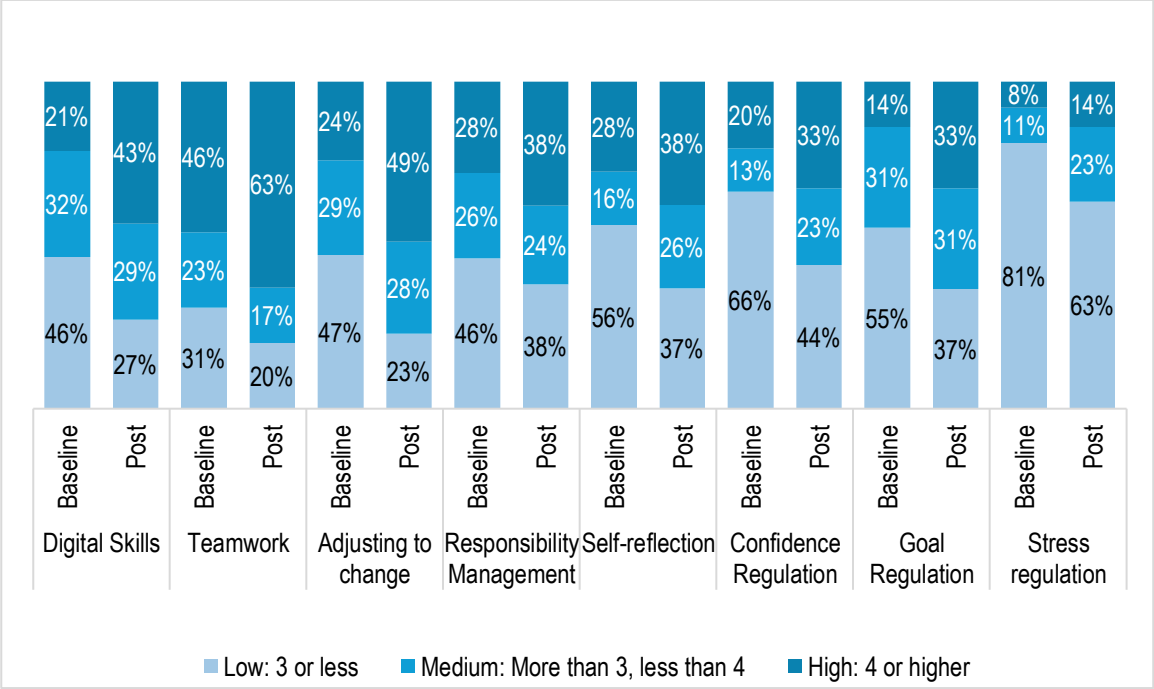
Teamwork skills also showed a large gain, with the proportion of participants reporting high scores increasing from 46 per cent at baseline to 63 per cent post-program. Participants shared that working with the other women in their cohorts was one factor that helped them build their skills:

> *"[There were] lots of changes, just getting used to working in a group even – teamwork, in a good way. Because we're all Indigenous women, [but] we have such diverse backgrounds and education levels and ages, right? So I think we really had to - or I really had to – be aware of that and understand how to work better as a team member."* (CFBC participant)

Among the adaptability skill facets, the largest skill gain was seen in adjusting to change, which increased by 25 percentage points (from 24 per cent at baseline to 49 per cent post-program).

Stress regulation showed the smallest change and the lowest overall scores, with only 14 per cent of participants reporting high skill scores in this area, even after the program.

Figure 13 Distribution of Skills for Success (baseline – post-program)



Source: Baseline and post-program survey (n=101-103)

In addition to those measured in the evaluation surveys, qualitative data collection activities revealed several other skill gains reported by Women First learners. Women widely reported increases in other Skills for Success areas, including communication, reading, writing, and numeracy. More broadly, participants reported that through engaging in programs and building skills, they felt more confident, motivated, and energized.

> *"The hands-on [aspect of the program] is my favourite, I'd say. Especially with the math, how he [the instructor] made it sound so easy. Back in school it was so difficult how they showed us. He showed us…step by step, division, doing measurements, how to use a tape measure, angles, length and width…Math wasn't my best subject before…[now] I'm eager to learn more."* (MBTI participant)
>
> *"[I've improved] my social skills, just being able to talk in front of people."* (SGEI participant)
>
> *"I just have more confidence now. I feel like I have more confidence to get back into the workforce, to actually talk to people and have proper conversations."* (PTP participant)

Subgroup analysis

To better understand the program outcomes of participants from different population groups, we conducted a series of analyses to assess subgroup differences in career adaptability, social emotional skills, and digital skills. These analyses revealed no significant trends indicating differences in baseline skills or skill gains for Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, racialized, or newcomer learners, although some isolated differences were observed. This suggests that broadly, there were no significant differences in the baseline skills of Women First learners associated with diverse social locations (e.g., newcomer status, 2SLGBTQ+ identity). These results also suggest that participating programs were effective in serving diverse groups, with most participants achieving and maintaining similar levels of skill gains throughout the project.

One notable exception to these findings was related to disability. Reporting a disability was found to predict significant differences in social-emotional and digital skills, but not in career adaptability skills. Compared to non-disabled participants, learners who reported a disability entered Women First programs with lower levels of social emotional skills. Regression analysis found that disability significantly predicted baseline social emotional skills scores ($r2 = .04$, $F(2,131) = 2.86$, $p < .019$).

Despite this, disabled participants demonstrated similar levels of skill gains during the program period compared to non-disabled participants. Regression analyses using disability as a predictor for pre-post change and controlling for baseline score found no significant difference in change in social emotional skills ($r2 = 0.33$, $F(3,97) = 15.73$, $p = .943$) or digital skill scores ($r2 = 0.13$, $F(3,95) = 4.73$, $p = .350$). However, during the follow-up period, disabled participants exhibited a larger drop in skills compared to non-disabled participants. Regression analyses indicated that disability significantly predicted lower changes between baseline and follow-up survey scores for digital skills ($r^2 = 0.21$, $F(3,39) = 3.48$, $p < .05$) and showed a sub-significant trend for social-emotional skills ($r^2 = 0.42$, $F(3,41) = 9.77$, $p = .087$).

Combined with narratives from the qualitative data, these findings suggest that Women First programs enabled disabled participants to achieve skill gains comparable to other participants, highlighting partners' aptitude for effectively and equitably serving a diverse range of learners. Such outcomes may be attributed to partners' emphasis on accessibility and flexibility within Women First programs. Additionally, the program's enhanced wraparound supports may have been distinctly valuable for disabled learners, who face increased risks of poverty and financial precarity that can hinder skill development (Palameta et al., 2021; Buckland et al., 2010; Sarangi et al., 2023).

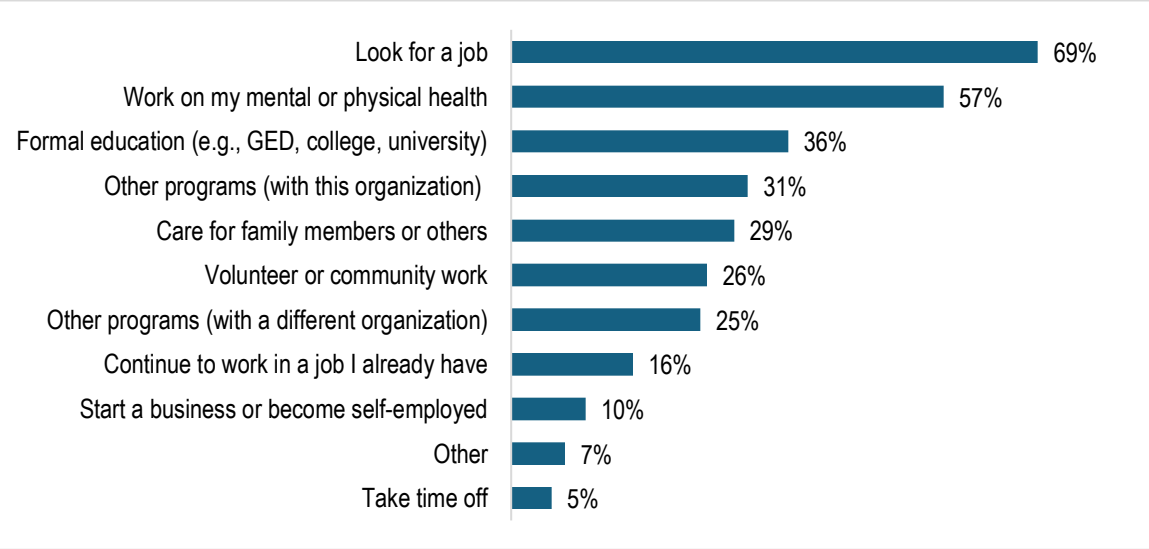
At the same time, disparities in baseline and follow-up scores between disabled and non-disabled participants highlight pre-existing inequities across some of these skill areas. These results suggest that – in the absence of ongoing supports or accessible opportunities to further develop

and apply the skills learned in programming – the barriers faced by disabled participants persist, particularly after programs' completion. This underscores the systemic and structural challenges that may explain the initial lower skills and the more significant drop in skills at follow-up for participants with disabilities, rather than implying that disabled people are inherently less skilled.

Employment outcomes

In the post-program survey, learners identified their plans for after Women First programs (see Figure 14). Most often, these included looking for a job (69 per cent), working on their mental or physical health (57 per cent), and pursuing formal education (36 per cent). Some participants planned to return to work in positions they held prior to the program. Others successfully found new roles while enrolled in programs, including learners who were offered a position via their work placement or through an employer partner of their organization.

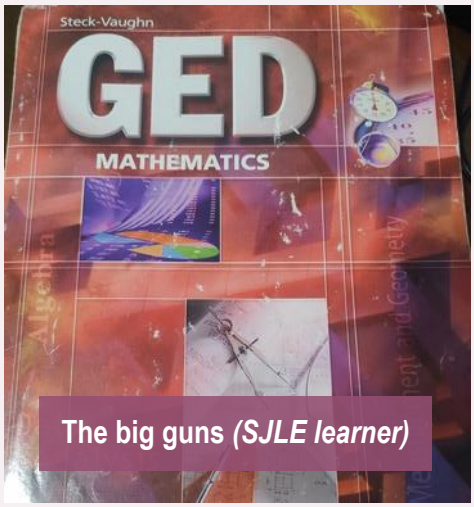
Figure 14 Learners' plans following Women First programs



Source: Post-program survey (n=113)

When probed further about their goals following the project, women shared a wide range of plans, including clear objectives related to employment, further education or training, and participation in additional skills development or employment programs. Some shared plans for engaging in community advocacy, volunteering, or starting businesses.

The employment outcomes achieved in Women First were closely related to outcomes in other areas of women's lives, including health and wellbeing. For example, one participant elaborated



The big guns *(SJLE learner)*

"I call this 'the big guns' – AKA, the GED math book. I want to share this photo because I'm determined to pass my GED math exam. It speaks to how resilient I am. This photo tells others that the Learning Exchange does not give up on people! I've worked on math since 2011, and here we are in 2023."

on how obtaining a new position aligned with her goals would better equip her to care for her family, volunteer, and pursue further education:

"I plan to do several of the above. As a full-time mom I always care for family members. The field I am going into will be great for both my physical and mental health. As a result of better headspace, I would like to be able to volunteer. I will be continuing with my formal education to continue to upgrade my skills (and pay) at my upcoming position." (Participant survey response)

Others reported increased motivation to care for themselves and prioritize their mental and physical health. For some, this meant a renewed focus on seeking accessible employment opportunities that offered appropriate accommodations and could facilitate access to mental health supports:

> *"[After the program I will] focus more on mental and physical health. Search for jobs that are work from home and flexible. Maybe start exploring sonography as a field to work in and do required studies for it."* (Participant survey response)
>
> *"I want to take better care of my mental health...no matter the cost. I need therapy weekly or so. This is obvious to me now."* (Participant survey response)

While participants reported increased confidence in their skills, many still expressed concerns about ongoing barriers and challenges, including systemic and structural factors that would continue to affect them despite being better equipped to navigate these systems. For example, one participant shared worries about disability discrimination, as well as employers' willingness to provide appropriate accommodations:

> *"I have two job interviews lined up this week. Overall, I feel confident that I will do fine for the interviews. What I'm worried about is the possible lack of accommodation for physical disability or not being hired due to being honest with admitting that I have a physical disability."* (Participant survey response)

As learners concluded Women First programs, they described a range of feelings, including pride, excitement, nervousness, fear, and anxiety. While they anticipated ongoing challenges, women described their programs as directly contributing to their improved ability to manage

these varied emotions, build resilience in the face of adversity, and continue to pursue their most important goals:

> *"I am feeling more confident about the next steps. I take rejection better than before."* (Participant survey response)
>
> *"I am nervous about pursuing my goals because [I] am afraid of failure. However, due to the support and understanding I gained from this [program] I know that I have the strength to meet my goals or at least try."* (Participant survey response)
>
> *"Being a part of the program for the past three months has boosted my confidence to pursue employment with confidence."* (Participant survey response)

Overall, women shared that their participation in Women First programs directly contributed to their increased motivation, confidence, and momentum to take steps forward. Beyond career pathfinding, participating programs offered short-term yet essential support to women in the form of reduced financial stressors, skill-building opportunities, access to mental health resources, and a dedicated environment for self-exploration and goal-setting.

> **"I am ecstatic! The job I am transitioning to is the first position I have ever CHOSEN to go for, instead of NEEDING to do....and has been a lifelong dream. On top of that, I will be in the same school as my daughter. As a mom who has always schooled or worked full-time, it will make me feel much more connected to my family. The women's project helped me be able to reach these goals quicker. Moving here was a large financial setback. With the help of this project, I was able to put a large enough dent in the debt I had incurred to be able to confidently commit to this position without having to worry about needing to work nights and stretching myself too thin. Aside from financial help, the program allowed me to speak with a therapist who acted as a sounding board for me. Having the space to dedicate time to ME encouraged me to pursue the position in the first place."** (Participant survey response)

REFLECTING ON PROGRAM DELIVERY: LEARNER & STAFF EXPERIENCES

Women as people, not only as workers

The positive outcomes of Women First programs extend beyond increased employability and connection to the labour market. While learners demonstrated strong skills gains that are expected to predict and promote positive employment outcomes – indeed, several program staff shared anecdotes of participants finding employment shortly after their program ended – both learners and staff challenged the notion that outcomes are valuable only or primarily as they relate to paid employment. Participants spoke to the ways in which a heavy employment emphasis can focus on building them up as *workers*, at the expense of supporting them as *people:*

> *"If it's a women's program, let's help women to be their best self with agency and choices. Let's not tell them how their agency should be applied, but let's help them to discover it. When they discover it, they'll know if entrepreneurship or a job is for them, or if they just want to volunteer."* (PTP participant)

Many participants shared how Women First programs provided the space, confidence, and skills to work towards their self-determined goals. While programs often had an emphasis on employment, practitioners sought to connect the training to learners' individual goals, centring their autonomy as it relates to work and career progression:

> *"The upside has been the way the program has been rolled out thematically in terms of building the person up. We've done accountability, setting core values, connecting your core values to your job search and making those connections…The way the worksheets and the layout of the work was done is exceptional."* (PTP participant)

Additionally, several learners noted that Women First programs enabled them to better provide for their children and families, both financially and through the intergenerational sharing of the skills, knowledge, and increased self-esteem gained in the project. For others, these programs were a rare opportunity to do something for themselves, rather than for their children, domestic partners, or families.

The fact that supporting women often has spillover benefits for their children and families—benefits that are not as pronounced when supporting men—has frequently been used as a rationale for funding women's programs and initiatives. While women perform essential and often invisible work in their roles as mothers and caregivers, our findings point to the importance of providing provide funding, support, and opportunities that prioritize women's personal growth and wellbeing as valuable goals in themselves.

Home bound, work in progress, dreams of the future *(Shania McAuley, MBTI learner)*

"I am from Sagkeeng First Nation. I lived there for most of my youth and moved to BC for high school. I am First Nations, but not connected to any traditions. My parents were not into spirituality besides the usual Catholic Church stuff. I work at Tim Horton's. I am an Aunty of 4. I am a sister to 3 siblings. I am an introvert. I love reading.

I've been learning a lot. I like the idea of learning a trade. I'm still undecided. I like the work that goes into a trade. It makes you feel accomplished when you finish a project. I feel out of my depth sometimes but willing to learn. It just means I'm learning and I love it.

I'm slowly becoming independent and financially stable. I want to have a stable, meaningful career. Something that I'll be proud of and that has value. I think learning a trade might be that."

Organizing training content & meeting diverse needs

While feedback from learners was overwhelmingly positive, there were instances across all sites where some participants perceived certain content or activities as less relevant, valuable, or interesting to them. Each of the organizations delivering Women First programs offered a high volume of content and structured it differently. At times, there was uncertainty among learners about how different elements of content fit together (e.g., wellbeing and specific skill-focused training). This was particularly challenging when learners felt that they were spending more time on certain material at the expense of something they found more interesting or valuable. For example, some participants shared that they would prefer more focus on wellbeing and social emotional skills, while others wished there had been more time spent on specific digital skills or job search skills.

Moreover, the varying education levels, skill sets, experiences, goals, priorities, and needs of learners presented challenges for instructors. At times, it was challenging to meet the diverse needs and preferences regarding pacing, mode of delivery (i.e., in-person or remote), and content itself. While the diversity of learners enriched Women First programs and provided opportunities for peer learning, these challenges also underscore the importance of clearly communicating what employment and skills programs will cover to manage learner expectations, as well as building and delivering flexible programming that can be adapted to accommodate different needs.

These challenges extended beyond the classroom to include other program components. For instance, the integration of work placements into some sites' programming sought to meet learners' diverse needs by bridging the gap between training content and real-world application. While seen as valuable, these experiences also underscored the value of early, ongoing, and comprehensive employer engagement to enhance employment and skills training programs:

> *"It was a little hectic on [the facilitator's] end when the work placements came up. I could see that it was stressing her out and the work placements were a little wishy washy and that they weren't really solidified or really guaranteed - or maybe there wasn't enough emphasis on us to really look into it early enough for [the facilitator] to get those phone calls in [to employers]. And then [the facilitator] just had a bunch of, I would say, uncooperative employers, people who weren't willing or weren't able to help with the work placement."* (Futureworx participant)

The role of practitioners

Experienced, knowledgeable practitioners were invaluable in meeting the complex needs of Women First learners in their cohorts. Practitioners often tailored the curriculum or activities

depending on the group, responding to the energy learners brought to class each day. In addition, instructors often adapted material to maximize its relevance for participating learners:

> *"After the first [curriculum module]…some of the stories…created a discussion of 'okay, this kind of felt like a story of a white person.' We would kind of bring in a discussion about, 'what do you think that might look like with an Indigenous example?' Not rewriting curriculum, but kind of creating that story and answering the questions from that view, because that was easier for some of the participants to answer versus [them being] like, 'well, I don't really have an experience like that.'"* (CFBC staff)

The ability to adapt to meet diverse and often unspoken needs in real-time requires highly skilled and experienced practitioners, including those with shared lived experiences or perspectives as learners themselves.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overall, program delivery partners in Women First demonstrated a strong commitment to serving the project's intended learner population: multiply-marginalized women who were relatively distant from the labour market and facing complex, multiple barriers. In this context, the programs delivered by partners sought to offer flexible and inclusive training and supports, centring on personalized goals while responding to unique, complex, and changing circumstances in women's lives. These practices are consistent with a feminist and anti-oppressive approach to employment and skills training, recognizing and prioritizing the individualized identities, experiences, and aspirations of learners, including those who continue to be underserved in these contexts (Auclair-Ouellet et al., 2022; Kaufmann et al., 2022).

However, the diversity of learners' goals in Women First programs and the individualized support provided by program staff highlight two key themes for further reflection by those who fund, design, deliver, and evaluate employment and skills training programs. First, it is important to consider how diverse, individualized definitions of success can be recognized and supported while also demonstrating program outcomes in ways that are coherent and meaningful to funders. Second, designing curricula that incorporate broadly applicable and effective best practices while allowing for adaptation to meet individual and group needs should be a priority.

Redefining success in pre-employment & training programs

Success looks differently for everyone, and holding all learners to the same standard risks excluding meaningful and impactful gains. For instance, just showing up to a classroom every day for a program can often be an important and meaningful accomplishment for training

participants. Our findings highlight how shifting the focus away from short-term employment outcomes (i.e., attainment) towards individualized definitions of success and progress towards personal goals is not only valuable but essential, particularly when supporting learners more distant from the labour market. Pursued within a holistic, feminist, and anti-oppressive approach to programming, such a shift recognizes that not traditional, full-time employment may not be accessible to or desirable by all learners, and asserts the value of volunteer, care, and other unpaid contributions to society.

> **"We have people who are older [in the program]. I don't see them going back [to work], but that doesn't mean they are useless. There's a place for them, if we can get them thinking the right way of how do you reconnect back with society?...It could be volunteering. There's an older person…she bakes cakes, and they're really good. I said, 'you could do YouTube videos.' She was like 'you know, I've thought about it…' And so maybe for her it's entrepreneurship, right? How do we explore those things in a way that [learners] feel comfortable and don't have to hide those desires and the gifts that they bring to the program because the conversation's always around how do you get your resumé done and get back to work."** (PTP participant)

In many cases, gains related to confidence, social emotional skills, and overall wellbeing are essential parts of the journey to employment. In this context, milestone-based pathways – "a sequence of interconnected milestones or outcomes that show how that achievement of earlier outcomes creates conditions that increase the chance of achieving later outcomes" (Brooks-Cleator et al., 2022, p. 2) – offer a helpful framework for contextualizing and appreciating diverse forms of success in employment and skills programs. This approach views the journey to employment as a series of connected steps, recognizing that programs may have their most significant impact in the early stages, while still ultimately contributing to employment as an intermediate or longer-term outcome. Further, it acknowledges the enduring efforts of staff and learners and encourages the celebration of progress and successes along the way. This perspective also highlights the need for programming and supports along the full pathway. Typically, the end goal is not simply employment, but sustained employment and ideally career progression. In many cases, as one partner described, *"the barriers don't end when you gain employment."* Supports such as job coaching, continued wraparound supports, and skills upgrading can increase the likelihood of retention in the labour market. In other cases, structural or policy changes represent important steps to addressing obstacles beyond the scope of employment and training programs.

Tailoring programs to learners & labour market contexts

Findings from the Women First project point to the value and effectiveness of skills training focused on foundational and transferable skills (e.g., adaptability, collaboration) for a wide diversity of learners, in this case multiply-marginalized women. Because of the transferability of these types of skills, they are also consistent with an approach that prioritizes diverse and

individualized goals and understandings of program success. Nonetheless, ensuring instructors have the flexibility to adapt curriculum to individuals and groups of learners can be an important contributor to positive and relevant training experiences. This could include adopting a more explicit trauma or cultural safety lens, accommodating diverse access needs and learning styles, or integrating traditional or cultural knowledge, among other potential practices.

Program activities should not only be tailored to the women being served, but also to the context in which these women are living and engaging with the labour market. Engaging with local and regional employers and sectoral stakeholders can inform program design (e.g., prepare women for jobs and careers that have high demand, ensure skills meet job requirements), promote community buy-in and awareness of economic opportunities, and facilitate post-program connections for learners (e.g., work placements, further training, networking).

Beaded earrings *(SGEI staff)*

"This is pair of beaded earrings made by a woman in the program prepping for her first-ever market. She was so nervous. It was cool to do more mentorship within the program – for instance, knowing how to price what you're selling to reflect your worth. Employment doesn't look the same for everybody."

"STRENGTH IN NUMBERS": RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING, & COMMUNITY

Research highlights the strong link between income and feelings of isolation and belonging, with the latter also closely tied to overall health and well-being, particularly mental health (Stewart et al., 2009; Kitchen et al., 2012). Additionally, social isolation and loneliness can stem from deep-rooted structural inequities, shaped by various and intersecting systems of power (Magnet & Orr, 2022). These insights are especially pertinent for the Women First project, which aimed to support women experiencing multiple forms of marginalization based on gender, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and so on.

From its inception, Women First partners anticipated that the women attending their programs might be facing isolation and a lack of social support. For service providers, building trust and relationships with learners was not only key to fostering an environment where women could engage and succeed in training, but also an important goal in itself. Nurturing connections and a sense of community – while deemed essential for the project's success – are not always measured or valued as program outcomes, particularly where skill gains and job readiness are the priority of funders. To address this gap and reflect partners' experiences and priorities, the Women First evaluation specifically sought to explore learners' relationships and sense of belonging as they progressed in programs.

The evaluation revealed a common thread among the diverse group of Women First participants. In addition to a stronger sense of belonging, learners were able to cultivate meaningful and valuable relationships with other learners, program staff, and their broader communities. These outcomes – and what contributed to them – are the focus of this section.

Compared to before learners' participation in a Women First program:

- 77% reported bigger networks of people to turn to for support
- 77% said they gained new role models or mentors
- 81% felt more supported overall

Source: Post-program survey (n=110-111)

"GROWING TOGETHER": CULTIVATING LEARNER CONNECTIONS

In bringing together participants with shared experiences and goals, programs not only equipped learners with skills training and wraparound supports, but cultivated an intentional space for

These boots are made for walking, not standing still *(Rhonda DeCoff, Futureworx learner)*

"It's a boot, but not just a boot. It represents strength, support, and it stands out. When I wear these boots I feel the strength of all the power of women in my life. They were purchased at Frenchie's on our diva on a dime trip.

It needs to be reinforced, to me anyways, that my journey and any great events that come to pass didn't occur just on my own abilities. My faith reminds me that my Creator walks with me; women (both friends and family) walk with me wherever my journey takes me. You may feel alone, but you never really are. There is strength in numbers and we can all help make another's boots strong.

I am strong, practical, and not afraid to stand out. The program and Futureworx helped reinforce and strengthen my boots. Community is meant to be explored with a good pair of boots."

them to foster friendships. Both learners and staff consistently identified the bonds and trust formed within programs as among the project's most powerful outcomes. In fact, nearly 90 per cent of participants surveyed post-program agreed or stronger agreed that they had developed positive relationships with other learners (n=114).

Project partners adopted various strategies to nurture this environment. In some cases, programs leveraged collaborative projects to hone practical skills while strengthening a sense of community: MBTI participants practiced their trades skills by working together to build sheds, while some SJLE learners bonded through their care for a community garden. Staff and learners also spoke to the significance of programs being specifically for women, suggesting that this *"created a safer environment and allowed for discussions to be more authentic"* (CFBC staff). Meanwhile, peer support – from organized peer-led coaching sessions to casual exchanges of knowledge or expertise – contributed to a sense of solidarity and reciprocity. As one SGEI learner reflected, *"I feel like I do have a lot of life experience that I've shared with [other learners]...A lot of stuff that they're going through right now, I've been there"* (SGEI participant). Sometimes, relationships were cultivated outside of the classroom: on WhatsApp, over dinner after class, or – in the case of PTP – at a bowling alley in celebration of International Women's Day.

For many, program cohorts represented small but mighty communities where learners could be their authentic selves, share their thoughts and ideas, and access peer support in a safe and non-judgmental way. As one SJLE learner reflected:

> *"Other participants are a huge source of support. It's really cool that we get to meet all these people from various walks of life who each have their own story. To be able to meet them and for them to become part of our lives and us part of theirs, it's very enriching."* (SJLE participant)

Emerging friendships between learners offered opportunities to practice the skills being developed in programs, from boundary-setting to active listening. What's more, the care and accountability exchanged between learners frequently extended outside the classroom, from a ride to the grocery store to a text message checking in following an absence from class. For still others, these friendships offered a powerful example of what healthier relationships based on shared values, experiences, and goals might look like. As one participant reflected:

> *"I feel like being a part of a group of women from all walks of life, all coming together for similar reasons really makes you feel safe and accepted. Coming from an individual who has been lacking in the friend department for years, it's been an amazing journey for me to get myself back out there, in little steps at a time…Knowing that there are people there to cheer you on, or actually truly believe in you is such an amazing feeling…It changed my own pessimistic outlook on my future into a more hopeful and optimistic view!"*
> (Participant survey response)

When considered through a feminist lens, loneliness is not only a deeply felt emotion but also a structural condition arising from intersecting systems of power and oppression (Magnet & Orr, 2022). This was widely reflected in learners' accounts of their lives before Women First programs, with many describing experiences of loneliness and isolation associated with chronic pain or illness, caregiving responsibilities, substance use, recent immigration to Canada, income or housing insecurity, a lack of leisure time, and systemic marginalization or exclusion, among other factors. Several described the challenges of making and sustaining meaningful friendships as an adult. Others were trying to re-establish their social networks in response to a recent move, breakdowns in existing relationships, or a desire for connection following social and physical distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

> **"There is just something so empowering and beautiful to see about a group of women from all walks of life, different ages, different life experiences, different backgrounds -– just so much diversity in the program – but they all learn something from each other, and they all connect over something. They were making friendships and connections, and they're just so supportive of each other. It's been really amazing to be able to watch that and also be like, 'I'm part of that.' A lot of the women have never experienced a safe or healthy environment with other women or just in general, so the fact that they feel safe here and comfortable, that's huge for them."** (Futureworx staff)

In this context, Women First programs offered a beacon amidst the structural conditions that reproduce social exclusion among marginalized communities. In other words, they fulfilled not only training needs, but social and emotional ones as well. Survey results underscore this, with nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners (n=110) reporting reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation by their program's end. This was widely echoed in conversations with learners:

> *"Being able to be in a group of women every day is very empowering. To feel like you're not alone, because life out there as an adult woman when you're on your own is very isolating. I felt more connected to my peers, and I felt more connected to the community."*
> (Futureworx participant)

Through programs, participants actively cultivated relationships that transcended generational, political, and cultural boundaries, fostering a rich tapestry of shared experiences. On one hand, learners valued the opportunity to connect with individuals whose backgrounds and experiences differed from their own. At the same time, many pointed to the collective affinity rooted in a shared commitment to learning and growth despite challenges: *"We're all going through our own thing, but it's just nice to know that you're really not completely alone in the world"* (SGEI participant). Shared experiences of struggle - from intergenerational trauma to poverty to single motherhood – reduced feelings of shame and facilitated an environment of trust, comfort, and vulnerability. As one learner reflected:

> *"I used to be afraid to tell people that I had food security issues because they'd say 'that person's poor, they can't afford food' and where I'm from you got judged for stuff like that. Whereas here it's just like, 'oh, it's terrible that you can't afford food. How can we help?'... We're all coming from similar walks of life."* (SJLE participant)

"The roots start off as me pregnant, overworked, stressed, confused, alone - no friends or family. Before the program I was always alone. I thought something was wrong with me or I was a loser and that's why I deserved to be alone. Coming here and having people to talk to meant the world to me. Making friends in today's world is hard, and the program helped me. It's important for people to understand that having a proper support system and friends really helps you realize what you want to do. There definitely is generational trauma that affects us, but we can overcome it as a group of women."

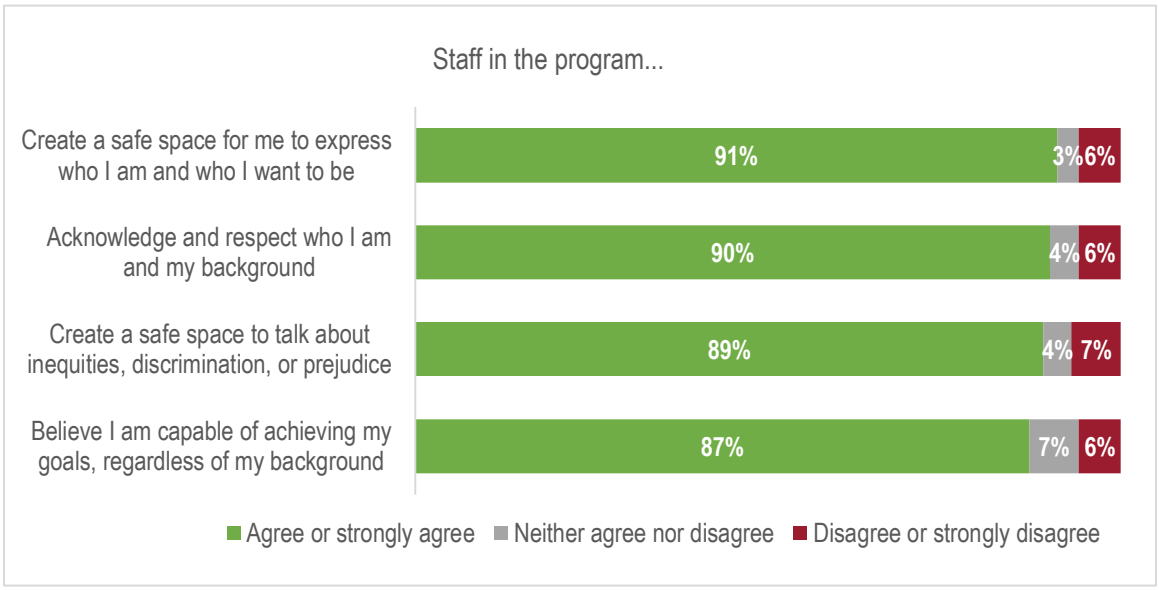
The relationships cultivated between Women First learners – while a key feature of the project – came with their own set of challenges. Interpersonal conflicts did occur in some cases, with risks including disengagement or further discord within the group. Harmonious relationships were not automatic: they required nurturing through clear group norms and expectations, established conflict resolution processes, and skilled facilitators who could serve as mediators when necessary. Furthermore, several participants expressed concerns about sustaining these newfound relationships after programs ended. This points to the need for mechanisms to ensure that the solidarity and support systems built during programs can endure, especially outside of a more structured classroom setting.

> **"You come here and you realize you're not the only person dealing with what you're dealing with. You're not growing alone – you're growing together, which can lead to you having another support system of people who understand… It helped open me up. I didn't feel so locked in."** (SJLE participant)

"THIS PLACE REALLY DOES CARE": ORGANIZATIONS & STAFF

The relationships developed between participants and program staff were another defining feature of Women First programs. Coordinators and facilitators widely recognized that *"if [learners] don't feel engaged or like we want them to be there and are welcome to be there"* (CFBC staff), then their participation would likely suffer. As a result, program delivery staff were active and intentional in nurturing respectful and supportive relationships with learners. Evaluation findings validated the importance of these efforts: most participants reported that staff delivering their programs created safe spaces for them to express themselves (91 per cent) and talk about structural issues (e.g., racism, housing crisis) (89 per cent), respected them and their background (90 per cent), and believed they could achieve their goals (87 per cent) (see Figure 15). Relatedly, participants were significantly less likely to identify a lack of role models/mentors as a barrier at follow-up than at baseline ($p<0.01$, $n=42$).

Figure 15 Participants' perspectives on program staff



Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

Learners across all sites described a strong connection with program staff, perceiving a genuine investment in their well-being and lives. Accounts like the following highlight the profound effects this had on learners:

> *"There was an instance where we had a really heavy talk. The facilitator looked around at the end of the day and she's like, 'I understand that this was a very heavy subject and you all handled it very well, but I know some of you might be just really good at masking. If that's the case, don't be afraid to come to me.' That was the moment when I was like, 'wow, this place really does care.'"* (SJLE participant)

> **"I think women definitely face a lot more barriers than people might realize or expect. We often put ourselves on the backburner, so to be able to offer an opportunity for [learners] to be in a group of likeminded women in a safe space… It is not only helping them to get the confidence to go into the workforce if that's where they choose to go, but just to have something for them, and somewhere to go to take care of themselves."** (Futureworx staff)

From checking in after a difficult day to helping a participant relocate midway through the program, program delivery staff made learners feel seen, welcomed, and cared for, with powerful effects. What's more, partners often went the extra mile to create safe and welcoming physical learning environments for participants, providing coffee and snacks, warm and thoughtful decor, and dedicated spaces (e.g., for in-class instruction, wellness/mental health room). This approach took on added significance given the gendered, racial, and socioeconomic disparities prevalent in the distribution of care work (Hankivsky, 2014). For many learners, receiving care was a novel experience; to do so in an environment where this was actively promoted and celebrated was truly ground-breaking.

Untitled *(Kelsey Hanrahan, SJLE learner)*

"The facilitator was my biggest support before, during, and after the program. Her being able to save a place for me and know which program would work best for me was a huge support. After the program, she helped me find other avenues to go to so that I can continue on my path."

By weaving their authentic selves and lived experiences into their roles, many program staff developed relationships with participants grounded in vulnerability, humility, and mutual respect, moving away from more traditional or hierarchical teacher-student dynamics. This was in part illustrated through partners' commitment to building staff teams that better reflected the learners being served, further contributing to environments where participants felt seen, heard, and valued. As one program facilitator described, "*being a woman who identifies as having some of the same barriers to employment as some of the women we work with, I was like, 'I feel I could be very relatable'*" (Futureworx staff). While shared identity alone cannot guarantee positive program outcomes, many learners did speak to the significance of having facilitators with similar experiences of womanhood, poverty, queerness, neurodivergence, Indigeneity, or immigration to Canada, among others.

One participant aptly captured this sentiment:

> *"The [facilitators] had experience being in our position, which is great. I felt like they were teaching us things that they learned as well, rather than someone who didn't know our situations and is teaching us to do things without knowing what you have to go through to get there."* (Futureworx participant)

Together, the evaluation findings suggest that positive outcomes from Women First programs were intimately connected to the supportive, respectful, and caring bonds forged between learners and staff. Such relationships fostered a sense of safety and belonging for learners, making them feel welcome and included in programs. They also contributed to a stronger sense of accountability among participants: beyond knowing that staff would notice their absence from or lack of engagement in class, many recognized and wanted to honour the dedication of program instructors. In the words of one learner, *"I found the support of the staff most meaningful. They were nothing but kind, caring, encouraging, positive: they wanted us to succeed. They helped me succeed in this program. I always wanted to show up"* (MBTI participant). These relationships also played a vital role in the effective administration of wraparound supports offered through the project. A foundation of mutual respect and trust was key to enabling learners to disclose needs to staff more comfortably and with less stigma or shame, transforming charitable interactions into those of more dignified, consensual support.

Reinforcing this, staff and learners recognized this deliberate approach as pivotal in enhancing participant self-esteem. This was demonstrated by the substantial increase in self-esteem levels reported during the program, with those rating their self-esteem as high (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale), rising from 34 per cent at the outset to 51 per cent upon program completion (n=99-102). One participant recounted their program's role in helping rebuild their sense of self, along with the knock-on effects of this:

> *"I came to the program feeling very low in my self-value, and overwhelmed by the prospect of finding a job. I am educated and possess many of the relevant skills to find work, yet every rejection was a blow to my self-esteem…I needed help and support to make it out of the depression I was feeling. Learning and exploring my values, core desired feelings, and other salient topics gave me the opportunity to examine my inner process of self-care and systems of support. Sometimes as women, we put ourselves last, never considering the damage that is being done to our overall feeling of worth. The program provided me with the space to examine and deal with those issues that were eroding my confidence and making it difficult for me to be my best self."* (Participant survey response)

"This photo is of Cape Chignecto during the start of spring, on a beautiful evening. Isle Haute is in the background. Even though the island is not included in the land, it is included in the photo and it completes it. It is okay to be different and to remember that we aren't perfect. As a visible minority I felt not involved growing up. This program made me feel like I belonged.

At the same time, this approach was not without its challenges. While partners and learners emphasized the importance and value of a relational approach to employment and skills training, they also acknowledged the time and emotional energy this demanded of program staff, who were mostly women themselves. One staff member articulated this tension, highlighting the importance of prioritizing service providers' well-being alongside that of learners:

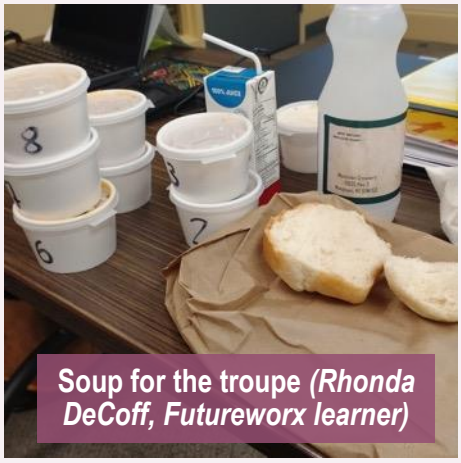
> *"This is a job that I always bring home. I check in with [learners] if I haven't seen them for a few days. I can never shut off. I'm very burnt out, but I love the work I do. You grow to care so much about them. These women are so much more than what they've been through."* (SGEI staff)

Maintaining staff-learner relationships and the effects thereof is another challenge highlighted by the evaluation. For instance, participants' gains in self-esteem were not sustained at follow-up, suggesting the importance of ongoing access to safe, supportive environments for women after programs' conclusion.

"I NEED TO BE ENGAGED": COMMUNITY & CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Recognizing the diverse meanings of "community" for participants (e.g., biological or chosen families, town or city, faith-based, nation), programs differed in their approaches to community engagement and belonging. Despite these differences, a stronger sense of connection to their respective communities emerged as a consistent finding among Women First participants.

Partners sought to bridge the gap between participants and their communities in a variety of ways. Learners in one of SJLE's cohorts engaged in volunteer initiatives throughout their program, while both Futureworx and SGEI welcomed women from the community to share their knowledge and experiences with learners as guest speakers or mentors. Several partners invited representatives from other local service delivery organizations to help familiarize learners with



Soup for the troupe *(Rhonda DeCoff, Futureworx learner)*

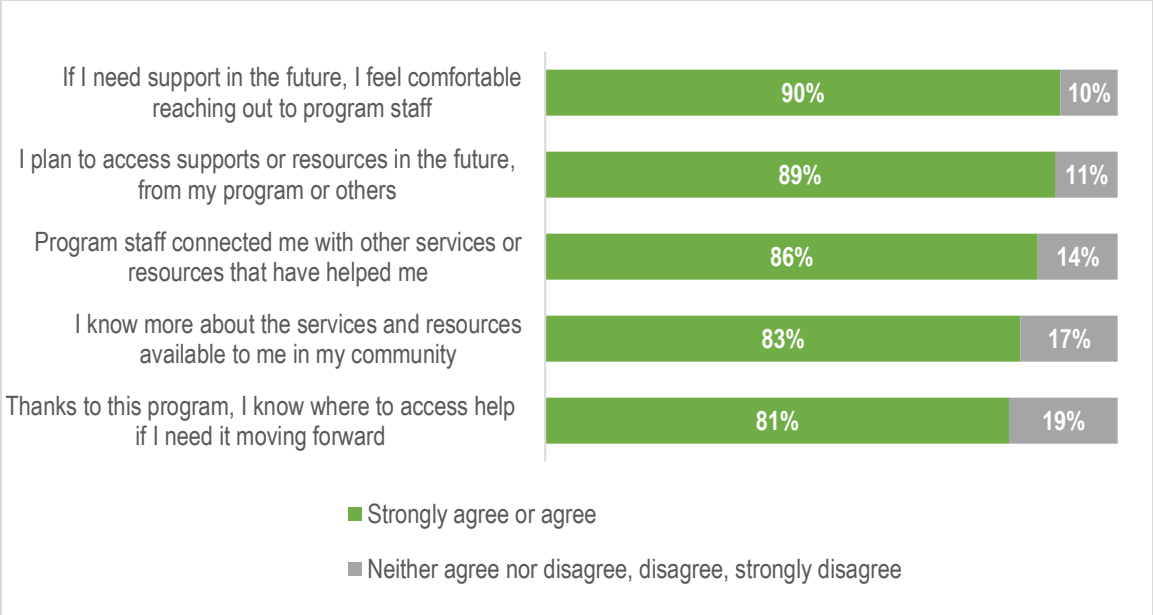
"This photo is of soup from Soup Fest. Restaurants entered a soup competition. The community got to vote for their favourite. It was more than just soup. I came away from the experience so engaged, nourished and included. Something so simple brings so many people together, fostering communication and opportunity. It created an atmosphere of contentment and happiness: who can be angry over a bowl of soup?

People are happier and healthier when they are engaged in their community. Anything can be used as a catalyst for engagement, it just happened to be soup for me. I want and need to be engaged and connected. Futureworx strived to bridge the gap from the individual to the community. My community strives to do the same, with soup contests and many other activities."

additional resources available to them. This approach underlines partners' aim of strengthening the ties between learners and their wider communities, with the hopes that these connections could continue to flourish post-program.

The evaluation findings strongly corroborate these efforts: in the post-program survey, participants overwhelmingly reported that they were more aware of community resources (83 per cent) and that program staff had already connected them with other helpful services (86 per cent) (see Figure 16). The vast majority also agreed that they knew where to access help in the future (81 per cent), or in many cases already had plans to access further support (89 per cent). In the words of one participant, the most valuable aspect of the program was learning about *"what's available to support someone like me. I felt so hopeless and stuck before but now I feel hopeful and like I can move around again"* (Participant survey response).

Figure 16 Participants' connections to post-program resources



Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

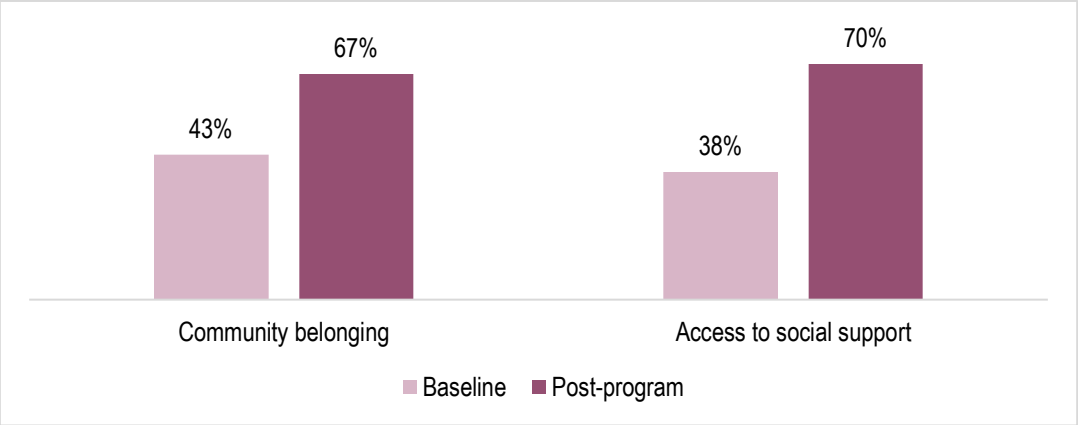
Building on this foundation, the three partners whose programs exclusively served Indigenous women (CFBC, MBTI, SGEI) made intentional efforts to incorporate cultural knowledge and activities into their programming. For instance, SGEI enriched their programs through language classes and workshops on beading, drum making, and ribbon skirts. Furthermore, staff at these organizations described drawing on the Medicine Wheel, Seven Teachings, or other holistic, Indigenous-informed frameworks to guide both delivery and content. These culturally-rooted approaches had a profound impact on Indigenous participants, exemplified by one SGEI learner's reflections on learning Anishinaabemowin:

> *"Learning my language…that was my safe place, my happy place. The teacher was really good. I used to be scared to learn it…It was the first time I ever felt safe to try speaking it. I really liked that part. I never thought I'd be able to feel safe doing that."* (SGEI participant)

Such testimonies highlight the powerful role of Indigenous-focused programming, not only in fostering a sense of safety and well-being, but also in supporting Indigenous participants to establish, explore, or grow their cultural identity and connections.

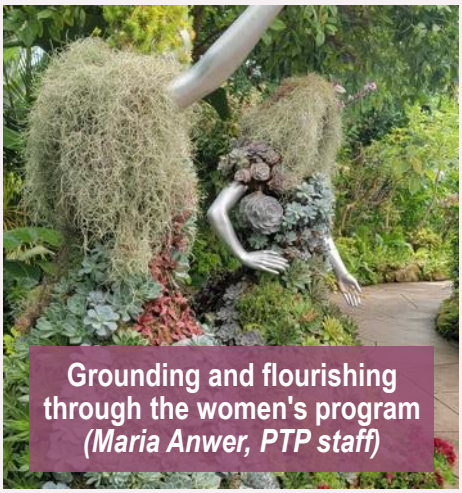
More generally, the Women First project saw learners develop a stronger sense of connection and belonging to their respective communities. The proportion of participants reporting a strong (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) sense of community belonging increased by 24 percentage points, from 43 per cent at baseline to 67 per cent post-program. A similar trend emerged regarding participants' access to a range of social supports, including help with housework, emotional support, or job/career advice. Just under 40 per cent of participants reported being easily able to access these supports (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) at baseline, compared to 70 per cent post-program (see Figure 17). Moreover, although a higher number of self-reported barriers did predict lower levels of community belonging and access to social support at baseline (r^2=.16, F(1,123)=23.16, p<.000), these factors had no significant effect on changes from baseline to post-program (r^2=.40, F(2,92)=30.20, p=.368; r^2=.40, F(2,93)=30.60, p=.052). This speaks to programs' ability to foster belonging and connection among learners despite the substantial barriers many were facing outside of the classroom. However, while Women First participants reported enhanced community belonging from baseline to post-program, these gains were not sustained at follow-up. As with other findings highlighted here, this speaks to the difficulty of sustaining relational outcomes after the formal conclusion of training.

Figure 17 Participants reporting strong (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) belonging and social support (baseline – post-program)



Source: Baseline and post-program survey (n=99-102)

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Grounding and flourishing through the women's program *(Maria Anwer, PTP staff)*

"We did an outing with our cohort to a garden. When I look at those ladies, they represent our program. The day began with our trip to the beautiful conservatory where women experienced serene and tranquil surroundings of nature. They explored the lush gardens and learned about the importance of conserving the environment. The surroundings allowed participants to meet each other on an informal level and make connections. Yes, they need the skills we teach them, but also the grounding: the confidence, the social environment we give them, I think that is the biggest contribution."

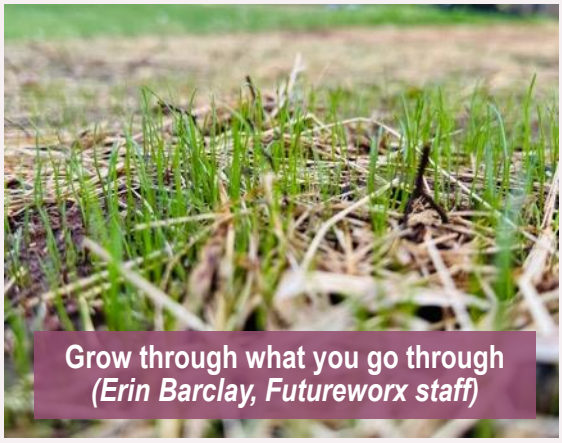
The Women First project offers rich insights into the importance and implications of cultivating training environments that centre relationships, compassion, and care. While doing so demands considerable resources, time, and energy from staff and organizations delivering programs, partners insisted that these additional efforts were not only worthwhile, but necessary. This perspective is substantiated by the evaluation findings, which highlight the immense value and impact of employment and skills training that creates space for learners to develop meaningful connections with each other, program staff, and the communities of which they are a part.

Discussions with partners revealed that while many suspected their programs made positive differences in learners' relationships and sense of belonging, it had been challenging to demonstrate this compellingly in the past, including for funders. While the outcomes explored in this section are rarely prioritized in the context of employment and training programs, evaluation findings from the Women First project illustrate the tremendous value of providing a safe, relationship-focused space for learners. The sense of inclusion, belonging, and community offered by programs established a robust foundation for learners to engage more intentionally with the training content, supported by the motivation and accountability of their peers and facilitators. Ultimately, programs fulfilled not only training needs, but social and emotional ones as well – and, according to partners and learners alike, were stronger for it.

When viewed through a feminist lens, the labour contributing to these outcomes aligns with the concept of care as "the energy and time we spend in intention to contribute to others' wellbeing, vitality, and lives" (Nishida, 2022, p. 9). By redefining the intentional, reciprocal relationships formed among learners, partner staff, and wider communities as acts of care, we highlight the necessity of making such efforts visible and valued. This perspective shifts the focus from one exclusively on skill acquisition to a holistic approach where nurturing relationships and emotional wellbeing are integral to the learning experience.

"A MOMENT OF LIGHT AND HOPE": THE ROLE OF WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

One of the defining features of the Women First project was its approach to conceptualizing and implementing wraparound supports. The integration of wraparound supports—a customized and holistic suite of interventions supporting learners to overcome training-related barriers—has been identified as a priority for inclusive service delivery (Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021; Zhong & Shetty, 2021). This approach recognizes that learners are less likely to succeed in training or employment when dealing with other unmet needs in their lives. As such, wraparound supports may be training-specific (e.g., extra tutoring) or more general, including those helping to address challenges that hinder participants from investing time and energy into training (e.g., securing housing, health care supports or services, obtaining legal support, transportation, stipends, childcare). Ultimately, incorporating wraparound supports within employment and skills programming can increase the participation, engagement, and success of learners who face multiple, complex barriers (Kaufmann et al., 2022).



Grow through what you go through
(Erin Barclay, Futureworx staff)

"Over half of my lawn had to be replanted following the destruction to my property due to Hurricane Fiona last September. The picture captured is newly planted grass growing (from seed) through the straw I laid down to promote seed germination.

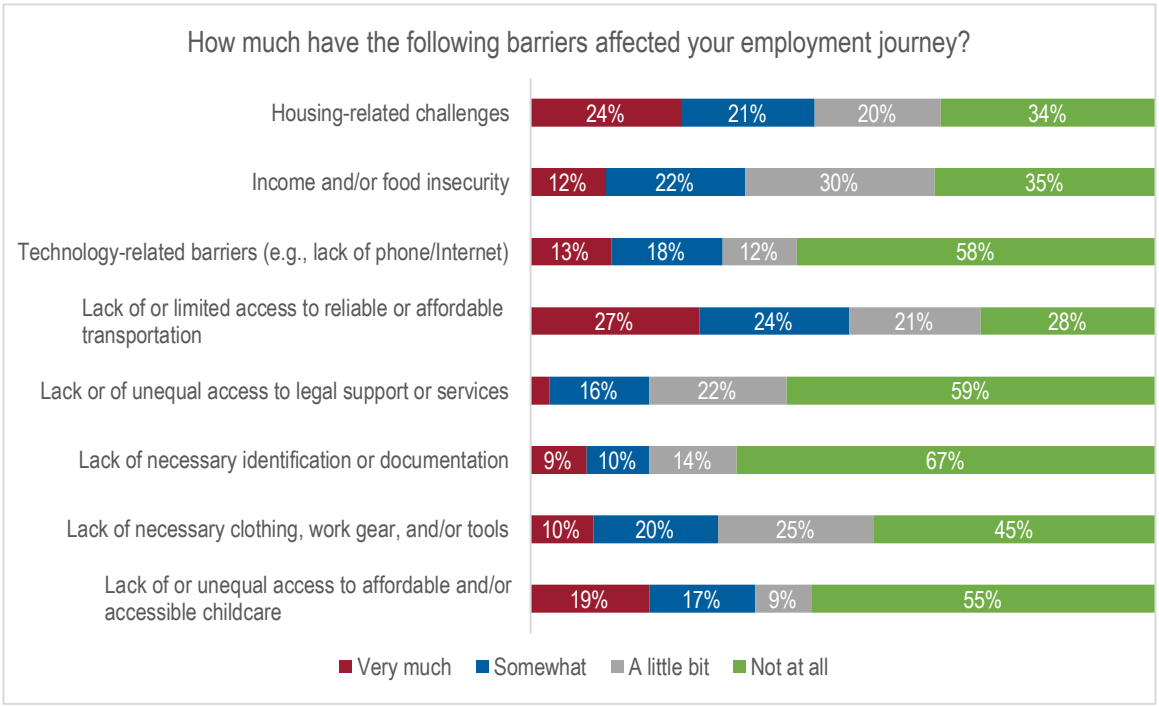
[This photo] represents our [Women First] program. The seed I planted had an established ground to get started – a solid base to facilitate success and foster growth. The focus of this undertaking was to study the impacts of including wraparound supports in the delivery of services to marginalized women. The success we saw validated our confidence that the inclusion of financial wraparound supports in pre-employment programming facilitates success…Our approach to offering this program was much like my approach when planting grass seed. To enjoy a healthy lawn, there are steps to follow to encourage growth: choosing the right time of year, preparing the site and soil, choosing the best seed, covering with straw, and watering appropriately."

In the Women First project, wraparound supports were not just a supplementary element of programs, but a defining feature. All partners had delivered wraparound supports in previous programs. However, by earmarking up to $5,000 per learner in wraparound support spending, the Women First project was seen as a unique opportunity to trial the provision of more generous supports. Partners also perceived this funding as having fewer restrictions than that which they had accessed in the past. This reflected a belief that *"flexible money needs to be built into all programs"* (SJLE staff), giving service delivery partners the ability to respond to emergent needs more quickly and easily.

Partners' desire to pilot more comprehensive, holistic supports was driven by the recognition that learners in their programs were likely to face structural barriers and elevated levels of need, affecting their ability to access and succeed in training. Findings from the baseline survey validated this perspective: 90 per cent of survey respondents reported that they worried about having enough money to meet their basic needs at least some of the time. Meanwhile, transportation, housing, and childcare-related challenges emerged as other commonly-reported challenges to finding or maintaining employment (see Figure 18).

Participant interviews further underscored the intensity of unmet needs among learners. Many cited provincial social assistance programs as their primary source of income, which overwhelmingly fail to bring recipients above Canada's Official Poverty Line (Laidley & Tabbara, 2023b). Others were ineligible for government transfers or faced delays receiving these benefits, and as a result had *"zero income coming in at all"* (Futureworx participant) before or during the project. These findings underscore the powerful potential of wraparound supports in helping address the effects of systemic marginalization.

Figure 18 Effect of employment barriers as reported at baseline



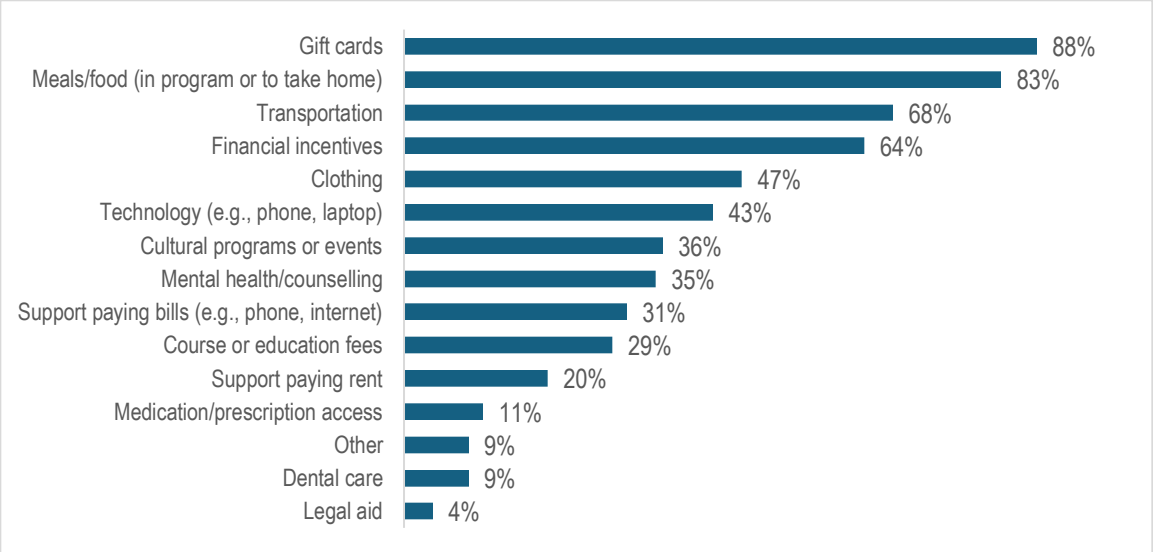
Source: Baseline survey (n=127-132)

"ANYTHING THAT WOULD HELP": NATURE & UTILIZATION OF WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

On average, the total value of wraparound supports accessed by each participant was $4,504. These amounts varied considerably from one participant to the next, ranging from $484 to $11,710. However, regression analyses revealed no significant differences in the value of wraparound supports accessed across different demographic groups, including disabled, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and 2SLGBTQ+ learners. Altogether, a striking 83 per cent of post-program survey respondents agreed that they were able to access the supports they needed in their programs, and that these supports were well-aligned to their individual needs.

In practice, these supports took many forms. Administrative data collected for the project classified wraparound support expenditures according to four main categories: basic needs (e.g., clothing transportation, food, housing), health and wellbeing (e.g., counselling, vision care, gym membership, smudge kit), legal and administrative (e.g., driver's test, fees for obtaining identification), and social support (e.g., literacy/training/cultural support). Supports related to basic needs were most prevalent, accessed by all Women First learners. Spending on basic needs support was also the highest of these four categories, averaging nearly $3,700 per learner. In the post-program survey, participants most commonly identified gift cards (88 per cent), meals or food (83 per cent), transportation (68 per cent), and financial incentives (64 per cent) as among the wraparound supports they had received (see Figure 19).

Figure 19 Learner-reported wraparound supports accessed



Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

Partners adapted their approach to delivering these supports according to learners' needs. For instance, supports classified as transportation might include bus tickets, gas gift cards, or personal vehicle repairs. CFBC and Futureworx covered the costs for learners' use of local taxi services, offering a temporary transportation solution in areas without reliable public transit:

> *"We set up an account with a local taxi service…They would track the woman's name, we would get the bill at the end of the month, and then we'd allocate how much money was spent on each individual. That provided transportation to and from the program. It also provided transportation to any other appointments that we felt were part of our program: if they had a court appointment, a mental health appointment, an optometry appointment, if they had children they had to get to school. Anything that would help position them to be successful at getting to the program on time."* (Futureworx staff)

The project's versatile approach to wraparound supports created more space for innovative, contextualized, and individualized responses by program partners. For instance, MBTI disbursed some of this funding as a training allowance, compensating learners for their time and energy at an hourly rate. This was meant to instill a sense of responsibility and freedom among learners, who were able to spend this allowance however they saw fit. Similarly, learners employed at SJLE's social enterprises could participate in a matched savings program intended to encourage longer-term financial planning. Earnings allocated to savings were 'matched' by SJLE through this funding; participants then received this savings amount at the end of the project. Other forms of support were intended to facilitate learners' participation in programs, for instance laptops (CFBC, PTP) or a set of tools (MBTI).

"This photo is of me with my new glasses on – and of course, Benny the dog. A change in my life because of [Women First] is my new glasses. I have been able to take care of myself better. Because of this program, I'm learning self-care – not putting myself before other people, but I am just as important as everybody else! A lot of the time you put everything else first. I'm just learning to regain myself. I realized that I matter."

MAKING THE JOURNEY EASIER: THE ROLE OF WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Supporting attendance & participation

Wraparound supports in Women First were instrumental in cultivating the necessary conditions for learners to attend and engage with programs with fewer external stressors. Learners widely asserted that financial, food, transportation, and other supports accessed through Women First *"helped [them] worry less about putting food on the table…and made the journey to self-improvement easier"* (participant survey response). This perspective was validated by service delivery partners, who insisted that *"a key difference…for maintaining the attachment of as many women as we did is the financial wraparound supports. I cannot stress enough the difference that made"* (Futureworx staff).

71% of respondents said that without the supports provided, they would have been unable to complete their programs

Source: Post-program survey

MBTI's use of wraparound support funding to provide training allowances for learners (calculated as an hourly wage) offers another compelling example. One participant underscored the importance of this support, which she described spending primarily on gas, groceries, childcare, and bills. When asked how her participation might have differed without the training allowance, she responded that: *"I'd probably have to work and do a program. I'd get wiped out because I'd be stressed all the time about how I'm going to get there. That paid training is huge for a lot of us"* (MBTI participant). Ultimately, the stress of managing these expenses led her to conclude that without her program's training allowance, she likely would have been unable to enroll. This perspective was widespread: in the post-program survey, nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of respondents reported that they would have been unable to complete their programs without the wraparound supports offered through the project.

Such an approach to administering wraparound supports not only facilitated learners' participation, but recognized and valued women's time and energy as essential ingredients in their training journeys. The importance of compensating multiply-marginalized women for these efforts is particularly significant given the ongoing and highly-gendered issue of unpaid labour in Canada (Gladu, 2021). In other words, wraparound supports in Women First sought to resist the notion that women should merely be grateful for the opportunity to participate in programs, instead starting from the assumption that women are already juggling multiple responsibilities amidst complex lives.

Offering stability & security

While wraparound supports in the Women First project were initially intended to facilitate learners' transitions to longer-term goals or address more complex or unique barriers, staff were frequently called on to address more immediate concerns, from food insecurity to unstable housing. This shift highlighted a critical realization: before learners could pursue employment or other goals, their immediate survival needs demanded attention.

Not gonna be hungry tonight
(Chelsey Hovey, SJLE learner)

"Food security is a major issue that has been a repeated struggle for me. You can work many hours a week and still struggle to afford food. A home-cooked meal makes all the difference in physical and mental health.

Yes, I have a great job. Yes, I budget as efficiently as possible. I still have gone hungry more than anyone here knows. Our province can do better than this. People are starving every day.

I'm grateful to have received help getting groceries."

Post-program survey data further highlight the role of wraparound supports in addressing day-to-day needs: compared to before their programs, a substantial proportion of respondents reported better access to good food (59 per cent) and fewer financial worries (41 per cent). Women widely emphasized the immense value of food-related assistance: one learner cited her program's distribution of grocery store cards as *"the only way I ever could have afforded to buy food for the last few months"* (participant survey response). In another case, a learner was offered additional support for groceries upon disclosing to a facilitator that *"I need groceries right now; I'm running out of stuff for breakfast, for my daughter to eat"* (SGEI participant), underscoring the severity of food insecurity among some learners.

Put simply, when learners were supported to meet their basic (and not-so-basic) needs, they were better able to show up and actively engage in programs, in turn contributing to their overall success. One learner summarized this persuasively, noting that in their program:

> *"I had access to many resources related to the job search, like how to write a resume and cover letter correctly, as well as many job search sites, volunteering, and various training. Financial support is also a very important aspect, because it helps to define clear goals and actions to achieve them without being distracted by daily needs."* (Participant survey response)

The idea of focusing on training "without being distracted by daily needs" reflects other research finding that those experiencing poverty may be "less capable not because of inherent traits, but because the very context of poverty imposes load and impedes cognitive capacity" (Mani et al.,

2013, p. 980). This underscores the importance of ensuring holistic supports are available to those participating in employment and skills training, as well as ensuring delivery staff understand how systemic issues like poverty might affect learners' journeys in their programs.

Beyond providing much-needed immediate relief, these supports also enabled participants to avoid precarious survival strategies that they might otherwise have been forced to adopt. Many learners described how having some of their day-to-day needs met eased the difficult choice between buying essential expenses like groceries or rent. One learner recounted how her program helped her *"catch up on my power and phone bill, so that I didn't need to take out a high-interest loan"* (participant survey response). In this scenario, the urgent financial assistance this learner had received had the added benefit of shielding her from predatory lending practices, which disproportionately affect low-income women (Acorn Canada, 2018; Fantauzzi, 2016).

> **"Imagine you come home from a day at work, worried about where you will find the money to make this month's rent, cover all the bills, and pay for your daughter's birthday party. You have not been sleeping well. A few weeks ago, you signed up for a training program…that one day could help you move up to a better job. But this evening the benefits of such training are abstract and distant. You're exhausted and weighed down by things more proximal, and you know that even if you go you won't absorb a thing. Now roll forward a few more weeks. By now you've missed another class. And when you go, you understand less than before. Eventually you decide it's just too much right now; you'll drop out and sign up another time, when your financial life is more together. The program you tried was not designed to be fault tolerant. It magnified your mistakes, which were predictable, and essentially pushed you out the door."** (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013, p. 152-153)

Fostering dignity, well-being, & joy

The flexibility underpinning wraparound supports in Women First enhanced partners' ability to address specific needs and challenges faced by participants, leading to a more effective alignment between what was offered and what was needed. Learners recounted how accessing tailored and individualized supports not only helped them meet their basic needs, but fostered feelings of dignity, joy, and self-worth. One participant framed wraparound supports as allowing her to save money to visit long-distance family members. Another described the simple yet impactful act of her program providing learners with daily meals, declaring that *"I am always alone and it was so nice to have someone cook for me!"* (participant survey response).

These and other examples speak to how wraparound supports in Women First programs were often able to transcend material aid, making women feel understood, cared for, and celebrated. As one learner put it, *"proper, thought-out support can give participants a moment of light and hope to keep fighting on"* (PTP participant). Yet another powerful example came from a participant with a history of substance use, who was deeply moved by receiving financial support for dental care:

> *"I lost teeth because of drug use. [The program] said they would be able to do the payment for that, and I was like, 'oh my gosh, really?' It's like $300. I know it's a small amount, but it's also not to me, because I would never just have $300. I mean, that's like a month's worth of food. I was moved to tears. I just couldn't believe it."* (SJLE participant)

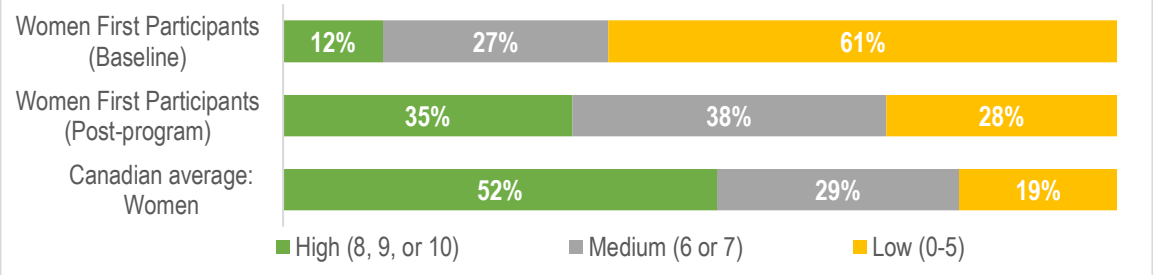
After completing their programs, over 80 per cent of participants reported feeling more supported and better equipped to participate in daily life. Both staff and learners attributed this in part to the provision of flexible, generous wraparound supports. This positive change was clearly reflected in participants' life satisfaction, as measured on a scale of 1 to 10. The evaluation showed statistically significant increases in self-reported life satisfaction, moving from an average of 5.19 at baseline to 6.68 post-program ($p<0.001$, $n=96$). These increases were largely retained in the follow-up survey, suggesting the project's enduring effect on Women First learners' life satisfaction.

Black Pearl *(SJLE learner)*

"This is a picture of my Jeep, 'Black Pearl.' Without my Jeep, I wouldn't be able to go on adventures. I went 9+ years without a vehicle. Black Pearl brings good luck, and an abundance of good things in my life. The women's project has helped me to achieve maintenance on my Jeep."

Reframing the data reveals another promising trend: the share of learners achieving high levels of life satisfaction—a score of 8 or above—surged by 23 percentage points during the project, climbing from 12 per cent initially to 35 per cent post-program (see Figure 20). On one hand, this growth signifies real, tangible improvements in participants' lives. However, this 35 per cent still stands in contrast to the 52 per cent of Canadian women reporting high life satisfaction, underscoring the amplified challenges and experiences of marginalization among many Women First learners (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

Figure 20 Life satisfaction ratings: Women First and nationally



Source: Baseline and post-program survey (n=99-101); Statistics Canada (2023b)

Ongoing & unmet needs

Wraparound supports in the Women First project undeniably played a crucial role in helping many women meet daily needs and engage more fully in programs. However, these supports alone could not fully address the complex and multi-faceted needs of many learners.

In the post-program survey, 41 per cent of respondents expressed a need for additional support not provided by their program. This finding initially surprised partner staff, many of whom had approved all or most wraparound support requests from learners. In reality, this situation appears to reflect not a refusal to provide support, but rather the deep and intense needs of many learners. The experiences shared by some women vividly illustrate this point:

> *"When I came to the program, I was suffering from depression and isolation. The lack of funds limited my ability to go anywhere and participate in anything…I made a commitment to become engaged and participate in things that fuel my energy and keep me hopeful [but] the lack of financial supports restricts this."* (Participant survey response)

In other words, the precarity experienced by some learners was such that even enhanced wraparound supports could only begin to address their needs.

Relatedly, the evaluation also revealed persistent and high levels of stress among learners. Despite positive changes in other areas (e.g., social emotional skills, access to support), levels of stress did not significantly change during the program. In both the baseline and post-program surveys, approximately 40 per cent of participants reported high levels of stress (i.e., 4 or higher on a scale of 1 to 5). In other words, the gains women made during the program were achieved despite ongoing stressors and challenges. These findings highlight the limitations of fulsomely addressing systemic barriers (and their consequences) within employment and skill training programs. While by no means trivial, $5,000 worth of wraparound supports often proved inadequate in extricating women from deep-seated issues of poverty, homelessness, trauma, and social exclusion.

DESIGNING & DELIVERING WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

The design and delivery of wraparound supports involved various stages, each presenting their unique challenges and learnings. Because each of the six service delivery partners in the Women First project adopted their own approach to implementation, we focus here on synthesizing collective wisdom from across the project. By emphasizing overarching themes that shaped the design and delivery of supports across sites, we draw out broader insights that might inform future approaches to implementing wraparound supports in employment and skills training. In

doing so, we begin to sketch out a roadmap for providing holistic, equitable, and trauma-informed supports to multiply-marginalized learners.

Getting healthier *(Leah Ramsden, SJLE learner)*

"I took this photo on a Friday night after receiving a huge support from the Power Up program in the form of grocery gift cards after voicing my concerns with my personal food security. This is something that I have struggled with in the past, and it is one of my biggest stressors in life.

During a SMART goals exercise with a classmate, I mentioned my 'get more nutritious food for groceries this week' goal, and that I could use was help getting my groceries home. This classmate offered to help me. Even though I said I was worried about putting them out, they were more than accommodating for me and made sure I was completely comfortable with it.

Truthfully, I would not have met this kind person (who also happens to share similar roots as me) if it wasn't for the program, and I certainly would not have been able to afford these groceries."

1. Identifying & communicating needs

While some support mechanisms in Women First programs were automatic (e.g., gift card incentives tied to program attendance), the process of identifying needs was often a collaborative effort between learners and staff. For instance, SJLE leveraged one-on-one coaching sessions between facilitators and learners to support this process. This offered a supportive space where conversations about needs could occur more organically, connecting to the program's overarching focus on goalsetting. One learner described this approach:

> *"[The facilitator] and I sat down for our coaching and we talked about what was going on in my life outside of the program…One of my short-term goals was eating healthier food, and I was like, 'but I can't afford healthy food.'"* (SJLE participant)

This led to support in the form of grocery store gift cards as well as a referral to the Saint John Food Purchasing Club, a local non-profit selling produce at more affordable prices.

> **"Some women got a lot more than others, and sometimes that really is just because they asked for it and others didn't. We tried to mitigate that through coaching, but I think it takes a while to build that relationship…If they're new at the Learning Exchange or are new meeting [the facilitator], it takes time. If you're in a 12-week program, maybe that's a month they need to feel comfortable to start asking. That's just not necessarily enough time. They may tentatively start: 'I need help with my dentist appointment,' but then maybe it's 'I need a new bed,' or 'can you pay my rent?'"** (SJLE staff)

Partners' ability to offer appropriate support often depended on learners' willingness to disclose personal and often vulnerable information. As a result, program staff widely spoke to the importance of cultivating environments where women felt comfortable coming forward with

challenges: *"It was very, very personal, the things [learners] shared with me throughout the program. That told me a level of trust that they had in me. Anything that came up, we just worked with them through it"* (CFBC staff). Yet, even where trust and rapport were established – and despite some initial concerns from partners about staff being overwhelmed with requests – participants often hesitated to approach staff with their problems or to request support. The evaluation revealed factors contributing to this:

- Fear or anxiety (e.g., about requests being denied, getting in trouble), often compounded by experiences of trauma.
- Discomfort asking for or accepting help, often rooted in pride associated with self-reliance or independence, not wanting to be seen as an object of charity or pity, or (for participants working at SJLE's social enterprises) unease making these requests to one's employer.
- Caution or reservation in requests, driven by worries about asking for "too much" or wanting to preserve resources for peers perceived to have greater needs.
- Uncertainty about the type and quantity of supports available, sometimes leading to assumptions that a request was ineligible or would be denied.
- Reluctance to share sensitive personal information with staff, especially regarding issues that may be stigmatized or criminalized (e.g., food insecurity, substance use).
- Challenges recognizing one's own barriers as valid, legitimate, worthy, or warranting help or support.
- Lack of trust or rapport with staff, particularly in shorter programs with less time to build meaningful relationships, or during earlier stages of program lifecycles.
- Limited communication skills or confidence in expressing needs.

Learners' hesitancy to approach staff for support reflects a complex interplay of factors. These include a lack of clarity about available supports among learners and staff alike, fatigue from navigating bureaucratic and complicated systems, and the discomfort and shame of asking for help in a society where "rhetorics of dependency…frame racialized, feminized, impoverished, and disabled populations as drains on the public" (Kim, 2021, p. 84). In this context, women's desire to be perceived as independent by not pursuing wraparound supports offers a form of self-protection. Learners who did come forward showed vulnerability and courage in doing so.

Ultimately, simply being put in the position of having to ask for help was often a barrier in itself. This was rarely due to a lack of need. On the contrary, partners widely shared the concern that needs were going unmet among learners who—for whatever reason—were not coming forward

to ask, or who only began to do so towards the end of programs. In some cases, this left staff recognizing the severity of women's needs only as programs were winding down. Partners experimented with a range of strategies to address this, including hiring a dedicated staff member to manage wraparound supports as well as building needs assessments into intake processes. However, these approaches also had limitations. For instance, while identifying potential areas for support at intake might allow staff to identify and respond to learners' challenges from the beginning of programs, the trust and rapport to support these conversations may not yet be well-established at this stage.

> **"Some [learners] – even after approaching them and asking 'you know, is there anything that you need?' – just the comfort of asking for stuff was a challenge. There are some who… hardly used anything at all, and maybe could have used it from our perspective, but I think they just struggled to communicate that and felt uncomfortable with asking for help… And I'm assuming life experiences: maybe they've had bad previous experiences asking for help or were refused help or were left to be independent, and maybe have that mindset that 'I don't need any assistance…' As things came along, they felt more comfortable and were coming forward more frequently."** (SJLE staff)

2. Evaluating & approving supports

Balancing the provision of timely and appropriate support with administrative and reporting demands involved multiple layers of decision-making and resource allocation, along with extensive collaboration between program coordinators, finance teams, and facilitators. Arguably the most salient challenge at this phase was uncertainty among delivery staff regarding how they could spend wraparound supports funding, including what constituted a legitimate or eligible need. Although guidelines for the Women's Employment Readiness pilot indicated that eligible wraparound supports might include "childcare, living expenses, transportation, [or] appropriate work clothing" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021), partners were often uncertain about what supports were considered eligible, administration and disbursement processes, and accountability mechanisms.

Accustomed to funding characterized by strict rules or parameters, non-profit service delivery staff found navigating this new terrain particularly stressful. In this context, partner organizations and program facilitators often formulated their own guidelines for evaluating learner requests for support, generally erring on the side of caution given the uncertain landscape. This cautious approach, rooted in the perceived or actual need to justify wraparound support expenditures, inadvertently made meeting learners' complex and diverse needs more challenging. Staff, put in the position of gatekeeping support allocations, frequently wrestled with the discomfort of balancing their accountability to funders against their commitment to upholding the autonomy and dignity of women in their programs. In cases where they did approve supports that went outside their usual practices (e.g., helping with bills or rent), this was often only after considerable deliberation. Whether these restrictions were put in place by

the funder or self-imposed by partner organizations accustomed to red tape, the effects were similar.

> **"The feedback from the first cohort was that it would have been great if the wraparound supports could have been issued to help pay their bills or rent, because that's where some of them were struggling…Nobody seemed to be able to give me a clear directive on that. We tried to look into it. We didn't get very far."** (Futureworx staff)

As noted previously, this uncertainty extended to learners, who – while for the most part aware that additional supports were a key feature of their program – lacked details about the quantity or types of support available. Women expressed frustrations over *"long wait periods for approval [that] made accessing supports difficult"* (participant survey response) and a lack of transparency regarding what supports were available and under what conditions. For instance, learners' feedback included calls to *"let each participant know what the allocated dollar amount is, so that they can better budget how they spend the money"* (participant survey response), an approach considered but ultimately rejected by some partners amidst ambiguity about whether this was feasible or permissible at all. Indeed, learners' desire for more transparency and communication from partners about the wraparound support process often stemmed not from partners withholding this information, but because they were uncertain as well.

Ultimately, while the enhanced wraparound supports associated with Women First were highly valued by staff and learners, the evaluation and approval stage posed particular challenges when it came to implementation. These challenges likely had implications not only for learners' willingness to seek support, but also the overall effectiveness and empowering potential of the supports provided.

3. Distributing & accessing supports

Staff across Women First programs demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in administering wraparound supports, skillfully adjusting their approach to meet learners' evolving needs. In some cases, supports were automatically administered as part of regular program activities: for instance, individual sessions with on-site mental health professionals, meals provided in-class, or organized group activities. Embedding these and other supports directly into the program structure enhanced accessibility and uptake, while alleviating the emotional and administrative burden of learners needing to request and be approved for assistance.

At the same time, this approach to administering supports sometimes had the unintended consequence of limiting learners' choice and autonomy. For example, while having an in-house mental health counsellor can offer more accessible support to learners, women seeking care tailored to specific backgrounds or experiences (e.g., 2SLGBTQ+-affirming, trauma-informed) may be less well-served through this model. This underscores the importance of balancing the ease and efficiency of integrated supports with the needs and preferences of participants.

For approved supports that could not be provided within programs themselves (e.g., assistance paying rent, new glasses), staff would either organize direct payment or have learners pay upfront and later be reimbursed. While this approach generally offered learners more choice, it posed its own series of challenges. For some learners, the need to pay upfront presented a major barrier to accessing support:

> *"I requested help…but could not use it because it required me [to] pay and request a refund. I do not have money to pay. Both of my bank accounts are overdrafted and my credit card barely has money to keep it afloat." (Participant survey response)*

Fresh *(Chelsey Hovey, SJLE learner)*

"This is something so simple that people often take for granted: clean laundry. Just putting on a nice, clean outfit has the power to shift the entire mood during a bad mental health day.

I had been unable to properly wash laundry for about 7 or 8 months. I couldn't afford the in-building coin-operated laundry, the laundromat, or the gas to go to friends or family to wash everything. Instead it was months of hand-washing in the bathroom sink and hoping it drip-dried in time for work the next day.

This program provided me with a washing machine to get the essentials washed daily."

Other times, partners were constrained in what they could provide based on the availability of resources and services beyond their control. Examples included programs seeking to use wraparound support funding to assist learners with mental health services, rent, and childcare - but with a corresponding scarcity of culturally-safe counsellors, affordable housing, and available daycare spots in their communities:

> *"What am I going to do with my [toddler] for 11 weeks? I am the daycare: we don't have childcare lined up…[The facilitator] kind of said, 'we can help you with that,' and they really couldn't…That support was not readily available and I don't really know what they could have done…I don't know if that was a problem of a lack of resources in Truro, though."* (Futureworx participant)

Moreover, partners' dedication to serving multiply-marginalized women—many of whom relied on social assistance as their primary or sole source of income—revealed tensions between the project aims and the practical realities of provincial income assistance programs. Attempting to reconcile this dissonance required partners to navigate many of the same rules as recipients themselves, which are widely regarded as paternalistic, stigmatizing, and ineffective at promoting labour market participation (Halpenny, 2023; Maki, 2011; Provencher, 2008). This was arguably one of the most challenging barriers encountered throughout the wraparound supports process.

To illustrate further, Ontario Works is one of two pillars making up Ontario's social assistance regime, providing income and employment assistance to individuals in financial need. In 2021-2022, 65 per cent of Ontario Works beneficiaries were assigned female at birth, with a benefit rate of $733 per month for single recipients in that same period (Income Security Advocacy Centre, 2022; Tabbara, 2023). Ontario Works recipients are required to report any gifts, donations, or loans—including from training organizations—to caseworkers, who have discretion in deciding whether to count these as income eligible to be deducted from benefits (City of Toronto, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). These or similar rules in other provinces posed challenges for all six Women First partners, causing immense stress for staff and learners alike. For example, Futureworx learners on income assistance in Nova Scotia could receive a training allowance of up to $150 per month, with anything exceeding this clawed back at a rate of 100 per cent (Government of Nova Scotia, 2023). For some would-be learners, the actual or perceived risk of adverse interactions with social assistance programs may have discouraged program enrollment from the beginning. For instance, staff from MBTI shared that one participant had withdrawn from their program early on, citing concerns that her participation would result in her being cut off from income assistance.

Program staff consistently went above and beyond in their efforts to ensure women receiving social assistance could access much-needed wraparound supports without their benefits being clawed back. Several partners attempted to liaise with provincial authorities and individual caseworkers throughout the project, seeking arrangements that would allow women to benefit from wraparound supports without unintended consequences. Despite partners' efforts—as well as their emphasis on the temporary and research-oriented nature of the project—they continued to face roadblocks:

> *"With all [Futureworx] programs there's a training allowance. We have that capped at a maximum of $150 a month, and that's to ensure that those clients who are receiving income assistance are entitled to keep it without clawbacks. With the Women First initiative we did talk with our local Department of Community Services to see how we could support the women who might be clients…to ensure that it's equitable for them. The local office told me gift cards, do gift cards. But then it went up the chain, and then they were having provincial government meetings. They said, 'okay, we're going to get back to you, we're going to get back to you, we're going to get back to you…' They never did."* (Futureworx staff)

In response, program staff pursued alternative strategies that would adhere to provincial regulations while still supporting learners (e.g., administering gift cards instead of cash, asking learners to pay upfront and be reimbursed). However, as described previously, these same approaches sometimes posed other delivery challenges, further complicating the administration of wraparound supports while compromising their empowering potential for learners. Ultimately, this tension highlights a critical gap between the project's vision of offering flexible, generous support with minimal conditions and the stringent limitations of social assistance, impacting both the delivery and reception of wraparound supports.

4. Navigating post-program supports

Both partners and learners expressed concerns about the prospective discontinuation of wraparound supports at the end of the project. The ethical implications of offering temporary assistance to multiply-marginalized women weighed heavily on service delivery staff. In response, several programs attempted to design and deliver wraparound supports with sustainability in mind. For instance, SJLE contemplated using these funds as a wage top-up for learners employed in their social enterprises, but – grappling with the temporary nature of this boost – ultimately pursued other strategies.

Participants' frequent reliance on wraparound supports to meet their basic needs was another source of stress. Despite recognizing the value of providing these supports while they had the funding to do so, staff widely expressed concerns about how women would fulfill these needs in the long term. Importantly, this challenge was seen not as one of learners' dependency. In serving multiply-marginalized women through celebrating incremental and diverse outcomes, partners recognized that many women were unlikely to be work-ready by the end of programs. This understanding—while reflecting a feminist, person-centred approach to service delivery—inadvertently led to gaps in support when programs came to an end. One salient example of this was learners' food security following the end of their programs, exemplified in the following quote:

> *"Now my mental health is good, because I wasn't eating and because I was stressing out about money. [The program] is helping me pay for food. So yeah, I'm great now…but after the program if I don't have a job, I'm going back to ground zero. I've had to ration my gift cards."* (PTP participant)

Several learners were also able to access health services with little or no public coverage (e.g., dental and vision care, chiropractic services, mental health supports) through wraparound supports funding, raising important concerns about continuity of care following the project's end. To mitigate this, some partners were able to extend learners' access to certain supports beyond their programs' duration; for instance, PTP learners had regular access to a social worker for several months following their graduation. While approaches like these softened the transition, the inevitable end of support remained a challenging reality to confront.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Women First evaluation highlights the critical role of wraparound supports in enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of employment and training programs, particularly those tailored to multiply-marginalized women. Through access to generous, flexible, and personalized wraparound supports, women were better able to meet their day-to-day needs, participate in programs, and focus on their longer-term goals. The significance of these enhanced supports is

underscored by the high satisfaction levels reported by learners, and by the nearly three-quarters of survey respondents stating that without them, their participation would have been untenable.

Despite the numerous positive outcomes associated with the provision of wraparound supports, the Women First project shed light on the complexity of this approach when it comes to implementation. On one hand, service delivery partners in Women First were well-positioned to reach those who stood to benefit from personalized supports, leverage connections with community partners, and foster trusting relationships with participants. At the same time, the evaluation revealed several factors that complicated the effective and equitable administration of wraparound supports. Many learners were hesitant to request this help, driven by fear, discomfort, and a lack of awareness about the types and conditions of support available. Staff also expressed uncertainty about how to disburse wraparound supports according to funder guidelines, at times leading to cautious and restrictive approaches to distribution. The prevalence of learners receiving financial support through provincial income or social assistance programs further complicated this picture: partner staff often found themselves in the frustrating position of finding ways to support learners without putting their benefits at risk.

All told, while the provision of flexible, generous, and empowering supports was understood as a defining feature of Women First programs, external constraints created barriers to this vision being realized. The approach to delivering wraparound supports trialled in Women First holds considerable promise, provided that the necessary supportive conditions are in place. The depth and severity of learner needs highlights the urgent need for federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal action on a number of structural and systemic issues. While Women First partners went above and beyond to address the immediate needs of program participants, these efforts risk amounting to band-aid solutions if not complemented by wider systemic reforms.

Safer shores ahead *(Chloe Halpenny, evaluation team member)*

"Captured in Sioux Lookout (traditional territory of the Anishinaabe peoples) during a site visit, this image transcends its serene landscape, symbolizing the vital support systems in navigating the messiness of life. Programs in the Women First project offered a haven – a place to dock, if only for a while – to those whose lives have been touched by trauma, violence, and poverty.

For so many Women First learners, access to enhanced wraparound supports delivered by caring and compassionate staff was crucial to their participation and success. At the same time, these efforts must be considered within the broader policy landscape, which fundamentally shapes access to and participation in employment and skills programs. Affordable housing, comprehensive mental health services, and a guaranteed livable income would all contribute to a stronger foundation for individuals and programs to thrive, and for partners to focus on what they do best."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented subsequently draw on interpretations of the evaluation findings from the SRDC evaluation team, the Evaluation Advisory Group, and collaborative input gathered during a partner-wide session facilitated by SRDC at the end of the project dedicated to developing collective recommendations. They are further enriched by valuable suggestions made by partner staff and participants throughout the project.

Structured around the four key findings areas of this report, these recommendations propose concrete actions for implementation by a diverse range of stakeholders, including service delivery organizations and staff, funders, policymakers across multiple jurisdictions, and employers, among others. Many of these recommendations are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, reflecting the complex, multifaceted nature of the challenges they address. We hope that these recommendations can serve as practical guideposts for creating more effective programs and inclusive communities that empower and equip women from all backgrounds, both in their employment and training journeys and beyond.

UNDERSTANDING & RESPONDING TO LEARNER REALITIES

1. Tailored and responsive programs. Value, prioritize, and adequately resource pre-employment and training programs that consider and are responsive to the conditions and dynamics in which the programs are provided, as well as the realities that ground participants' lives before and during their participation in programs. Such an approach requires funders to recognize and value a wider range of program outcomes, and allocate resources accordingly. In turn, delivery organizations should ensure practitioners have sufficient time and budget to address the full spectrum of learners' needs.

2. Sustainable and flexible funding. Adequately resource service providers to address the complexity of participants' needs. This requires funders to offer sustainable, flexible, and core (i.e., non-project-based) funding. It also calls on funders to provide greater agency to service providers to design and implement programs that reflect their extensive knowledge and expertise of their service delivery context. In turn, this also requires service providers to continue to seek to understand and adapt programs to reflect dynamic learner contexts.

3. Reframe "success." Programs want to – and with the right support, are well-positioned to – support learners who are most distant from the labour market. However, narrow, rigid ideas about what constitutes program success rarely reflect learner realities or service delivery contexts. Further, when short-term employment outcomes are the primary indicators of program or project success, service providers may be disincentivized from serving learners with greater needs, turning instead to those most likely to demonstrate gains prioritized by

funders. Adopting a more expansive understanding of success in programs like Women First would mean valuing a wider diversity of positive program outcomes, including those which might be more feasible and desirable for multiply-marginalized learners. This means viewing pre-employment and training programs as part of a longer reset for those who have a longer journey back to the labour market due to systemic and structural factors.

4. Attend to broader systemic issues. Learners affected by income, housing, or food insecurity will inevitably face challenges in employment and training programs. Addressing these systemic issues requires investments in services and supports that are foundational to women's wellbeing (e.g., income support, affordable housing, accessible childcare, comprehensive healthcare, public transportation). Rather than responding to symptoms of inadequate systems, this would create the conditions for more effective programs where service providers can feel more assured that learners are coming to them with their basic needs already met.

EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS

5. Transferable foundational skills training. Identify, adapt, or develop training curricula such as Skills for Success that are effective for diverse learners and have broad applicability and transferability in terms of outcomes. These characteristics support training programs' capacity to be adapted to support a range of goals and objectives prioritized by individual or cohorts of learners. This includes those related to employment, confidence and self-esteem, social networks and sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing, among others.

6. Programming tailored to learner needs and context. To the extent possible, service providers should tailor curricula and supports to individual and group needs to ensure relevance and safety for learners (e.g., trauma-informed approaches, emphasis on cultural safety, commitment to accessibility). Engaging local employers to align programming with the local labour market may be another useful practice. Further, a transparent and consistent intake process can help establish and manage expectations among learners. Beyond facilitating informed participation, the intake process can build buy-in among learners and foster an understanding of the program's relevance, considering their past experiences, current lives, and future goals.

7. Recognizing diverse definitions of success. Measure, report, and value a diversity of program outcomes (e.g., confidence, skills, wellbeing, personal goals or achievements) in addition to those explicitly related to employment and labour market participation. As a tool, milestone-based pathways are one helpful framework for demonstrating the interconnectedness of these varied outcomes in women's journeys to employment, including how these earlier outcomes can support future education or career endeavours. In

recognition of this, funding for employment and skills training programs should be suitably flexible to acknowledge and support the value of early successes on the pathway to employment.

8. Support progress along the full pathway to employment. Funders and service delivery providers should prioritize the adequate resourcing and provision of program activities and wraparound supports that assist learners on their full journey to employment, including the hiring and onboarding process, retention, and career progression.

RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING, & COMMUNITY

9. Holistic and comprehensive programs. Value, prioritize, and adequately resource employment and training programs that integrate skills development with learners' emotional and social well-being. Such an approach requires funders to recognize and value a wider range of program outcomes and allocate resources accordingly. In turn, delivery organizations should ensure practitioners have sufficient time and budget to address the full spectrum of learners' needs, including those related to social connection and belonging.

10. Representative, diverse, and supported staffing. Strive to have program staff reflect the diversity of learners to foster relatability and understanding. In addition, equip practitioners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to facilitate relational program environments while protecting their own well-being (e.g., wages and benefits that reflect this labour, sufficient time and flexibility in program schedules, access to relevant professional development opportunities).

11. *In-program* connection and engagement. Design programs to foster trusting and respectful relationships among learners and staff. Potential strategies include implementing supportive program protocols or mechanisms (e.g., for conflict resolution, developing community norms), creating opportunities for learners to connect with one other through shared experiences, and integrating activities that seek to strengthen learners' connections with one another, program facilitators, and geographical, cultural, or other communities.

12. *Post-program* connection and engagement. Consider strategies to sustain social and emotional gains beyond the end of programs. This could take multiple forms, including alumni networks or events, mentorship programs, or online or other fora for ongoing peer support between learners. In the long term, there is a need for governments to consider and address the broader structural factors that contribute to loneliness and isolation for multiply-marginalized individuals (e.g., economic precarity, exclusion associated with sexism/racism/ableism).

WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

13. Generous, flexible wraparound supports. Generous, flexible wraparound supports serve a crucial role in employment and training programs, and can be especially beneficial for multiply-marginalized learners. Service providers and funders should prioritize these supports, understanding that implementing them equitably and effectively is a complex process requiring considerable thought and collaboration. Key considerations include: employing staff with expertise in trauma-informed practices and knowledge of community resources; establishing clear and comfortable processes for early (i.e., at intake) and ongoing identification of needs, including mechanisms for participants to request supports they identify as important; setting transparent expectations about the availability and utilization of support funds; prioritizing participants' autonomy in the use of wraparound funds, recognizing the greater risk in not providing these supports than potential misuse; and providing optional additional personal and professional development opportunities for learners (e.g., training in financial literacy or budgeting) where financial assistance is among the supports offered.

14. Making social assistance work for participants. The threat or practice of benefits being clawed back due to the receipt of wraparound supports poses immense challenges for both delivery staff and the learners being served. Further, it results in provinces benefitting financially at the federal government's expense. The Women First project shed light on the need for changes at both the federal and provincial levels – as well as improved collaboration between these stakeholders – to ensure that training and employment programs are inclusive of and accessible to social or income assistance recipients. This could include increasing earnings limits for income assistance recipients or exempting training and employment supports from earnings assessments, particularly given their short-term and stabilizing nature.

15. Strengthening the social safety net. Employment and training programs, even with generous wraparound supports, are not a substitute for a robust social safety net. Success in these programs relies on participants being assured of their basic necessities, including food security, stable housing, and reliable childcare. A number of systemic and structural changes would support learners – particularly those who experience multiple forms of marginalization – to participate in programs and succeed afterwards. Partners and learners highlighted the need for policy reforms focused on enhancing the affordability, accessibility, and availability of housing, childcare, and certain forms of healthcare (e.g., mental health supports, dental care, vision care). The urgent need to address poverty and income insecurity also emerged as a key recommendation. This could include reforms to provincial social and income assistance programs in the shorter term, and a guaranteed livable income as a more permanent solution.

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