

Feminist Entrepreneurship at a Crossroads

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Introduction

Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are vital to Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem. In Canada, these businesses contribute about \$150 billion to the economy and hire more than 1.5 million people (Cukier, Hassannezhad Chavoushi, et al., 2022). Supporting women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs' empowerment boosts the economy and improves social and environmental outcomes (Cukier, Hassannezhad Chavoushi, et al., 2022; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2022). However, these entrepreneurs face several barriers due to social and gender inequalities and stereotypes that impact access to appropriate financing, resources, networks, and support.

Feminist entrepreneurs and self-employed people challenge these systemic barriers and use their businesses to create economic and social change. Feminist entrepreneurship is collective, inclusive, and transformative, and does not follow mainstream entrepreneurship values and practices (Harquail, 2019b). In Canada, feminist entrepreneurship is already practiced by women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, sometimes unknowingly.

The Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF) supports feminist entrepreneurship by leveraging collective expertise, building a network of entrepreneurs and service providers, and sharing creating resources grounded in intersectional feminist perspectives and/or Indigenous worldviews. In the Partnering for Feminist Entrepreneurship Project, CWF provides support for underserved women and gender diverse entrepreneurs who experience multiple forms of marginalization through education, training, mentorship, and networking opportunities in collaboration with partner organizations (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023b).

In 2023, Sustainable Livelihoods Canada (SLC) and CWF collaborated with the Research Shop at the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) to conduct a literature review on feminist entrepreneurship. We reviewed sources on feminist entrepreneurship within Canada and across other countries, comparing women and gender-diverse entrepreneurship in feminist versus mainstream arenas ([Appendix 1: Research Methods](#)). Our review supports CWF and its partners' work in feminist entrepreneurship. It helps to ground the project activities and evaluation, situate collective learning and expertise in a broader context, and identify opportunities for thought leadership. Together, we aim to address systemic barriers that impede the success of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs.

In our review, we find that feminist entrepreneurship is at a crossroads. How we think about and perceive 'feminism' and 'entrepreneurship' is influenced by history, the economy, and society. The Canadian ecosystem is not a welcoming environment for feminist entrepreneurship. Many policies and financial institutions prioritize and reinforce mainstream entrepreneurship, and feminism that is individual and neoliberal. Feminist entrepreneurship also has many overlapping values with other frameworks and entrepreneurship models, such as co-operative and social enterprise models, which can make it hard to define at times. Much of the literature on women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs' practices use 'gender' and 'intersectional' lenses rather than an overtly feminist approach, but we can still learn from these sources. In our review, we hope to challenge some of the leading perspectives on entrepreneurship and dig deep into what feminist entrepreneurship means in theory and practice.



Our review is divided into the following sections:

- [Deconstructing Feminism and Entrepreneurship in Canada](#): an overview of perspectives on feminism and entrepreneurship in Canada
- [Feminist Entrepreneurship](#): a discussion on the idea of feminist entrepreneurship in theory and practice
- [Feminism in Canada's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem](#): a look into the space for feminism in the networks of people and institutions that enable entrepreneurship
- [International Perspectives](#): considers some feminist perspectives on entrepreneurship from outside of Canada
- [Paths Forward](#): an outline of some the potential challenges with the concept and roots of feminist entrepreneurship

Deconstructing Feminism and Entrepreneurship in Canada

Summary

- 'Feminist entrepreneurship' is difficult to define due to the many meanings of feminist and entrepreneurship across history, location, identities, political, social, and economic contexts.
- The concepts of 'feminism' and 'entrepreneurship' can sometimes be at odds with each other.
- The rise of neoliberalism had a major impact on feminism, and the feminist entrepreneurship we see today.
- Mainstream entrepreneurship is commonly defined from a male-centered and patriarchal point of view and reinforces gender inequality.
- The idea of mainstream entrepreneurship may not be relevant to all women and gender-diverse people running their own businesses.

Feminism

57% of women in Canada now consider themselves feminists as of 2021, in comparison to only one-third of Canadian women in 2001 (Envionics Institute, 2022, p. 10).

[Feminism](#) is a belief and movement that aims for equal rights, respect, and freedom for everyone and that works to end sexism and oppression. We utilize an intersectional feminist approach in this review that is aligned with the Canadian Women's Foundation mission. Our definition of intersectional feminism:

- Aims “to understand the many ways different women are affected by barriers and discrimination that go beyond their gender” (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2023c)
- Seeks “to establish political, social, and economic equality among women, men, and all people, and feminism aims to create a world where people flourish”(Harquail, 2019a, p. 15)

Intersectionality emerged from the works of Black feminist scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989) to explain the intersections of race and gender that produce barriers for Black women. Intersectionality helps us to understand “the challenges that diverse women face, as well as how we work together to advance gender equality” (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2023c). Intersectionality and intersectional feminism have, in theory, come to describe the overlapping impacts of and systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, identity, ability, and other forms of discrimination (Centre for Intersectional Justice, 2023). Intersectional feminism also helps to inform the analysis of literature on feminist entrepreneurship, and the practices of women and diverse entrepreneurs.

In our society, feminism has gained a negative reputation and has been known as the “unspeakable F-word” (Moi, 2006, p. 1739). We find that there are many ways feminism is defined in society and in entrepreneurship. Some definitions of feminism are at odds with entrepreneurship. In contrast, more commonly accepted ideas of feminism can reinforce dominant powers and economic systems.

Feminism has long been fractured by an internal battle fought along the lines of racism, capitalism, and empire. The struggle over what it means to be a feminist, and what kind of world feminists want to build, may seem new. But there’s never been just one feminism, just one singular and solitary politics of women’s rights and equality (Schuller, 2021, p. 14).

The Origins of Today’s Feminism

The feminism that we see today in Canada is shaped by its history (see Table 1). The history of feminism is often described in ‘waves’ that reflect the goals of activism over time, although these waves are overlapping, and distinctions between them can sometimes be misleading (Malinowska, 2020). In our review, we found that feminist entrepreneurship has been shaped by **neoliberalism** and feminism coming together (second and third waves).

Table 1: Summary of Canada’s Waves of Feminism


Wave	Details
Pre-First Wave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of strong feminist figures in activism, arts, politics, economy, and society worldwide that were not necessarily called “feminist” • Existence of matriarchal societies
First Wave (1880s – 1920s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early suffragists (often white, affluent women) (Allford, 2019) • Excluded women from racialized communities

Wave	Details
Second Wave (1960s – late 1980s and early 1990s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerged through grassroots groups organizing for civil rights, equality, education, work, and political participation (Allford, 2019; Canadian Encyclopedia, 2016) • Dominated by white, middle-class women who advocated for “sisterhood” and equality, which erased the diverse kinds of oppression that women face (Eidinger, 2020) • Many marginalized and racialized folks formed their own feminist organizations due to exclusion from mainstream feminism (Eidinger, 2020) • Significantly impacted and shaped by the rise of neoliberalism
Third Wave (late 1980s and early 1990s – 2000s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often associated with feminist punk subculture • More deliberately inclusive than the second wave (Eidinger, 2020). • Emergence of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)
Fourth Wave (late 2000s – present):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized intersectionality and inclusion, along with justice for gender and sexual violence survivors through movements such as #MeToo (Eidinger, 2020). • Often associated with ‘digital/online feminism’

Notably, mainstream feminism has historically been white (Schuller, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). As Schuller writes, “since the mid-nineteenth century, Black feminists have pushed back against white feminism and developed intersectional feminist theory to identify how white supremacy, misogyny, and capitalism converge” (Schuller, 2021, p. 18).

In the 1980s, the rise of neoliberal beliefs and policies influenced “ideas about feminist political struggle, emphasizing the power of individual action - and not collective resistance - to redress gender-based inequalities” (Small & Jansen, 2020, p. 265). As feminism went through the process of becoming neoliberal (neoliberalization), how we viewed economic empowerment changed to follow neoliberal ideas and logic (Prügl, 2015). As a result, neoliberal feminism emerged to *responsibilize* women to improve their own situations, rather than placing responsibility on structural and systemic barriers and inequalities (Small & Jansen, 2020). The neoliberal feminist activism that took place in the early 1990s led to what society thought was the ‘death’ of feminism (Small & Jansen, 2020). However, the idea of feminism did not die here. Rather, feminist advocacy shifted and was rebuilt to challenge neoliberal beliefs and institutions in new ways (Small & Jansen, 2020).

Feminists in Canada turned to online communications to “navigate and survive the changing conditions for activism,” and to address long distances and barriers to participation (Small & Jansen, 2020, p. 266). This ‘online’ feminism has been criticized for being performative activism and a lack of real action (Eidinger, 2020; Small & Jansen, 2020). This type of feminism is known as popular or ‘happy’ feminism, which “refers to practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organizing marches to hashtag activism to commodities” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 13). This is important because social media and online sources play a critical role in



entrepreneurship and feminist culture today. However, a lot of these conversations still have individualistic and neoliberal roots (Harquail, 2019a; Porém et al., 2023; Rottenburg, 2019).

The cult of individualism, and the resultant form of feminism made notorious by women like Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg in Lean In, and to some extent by Gloria Steinem before her, encourages every woman who reaches power to believe she got there on her own and without any free passes (Zakaria, 2021, p. 158).


Neoliberalism continues to be in conversations about business and the economy. It also continues to influence how we view the relationship between entrepreneurship and feminism, and the challenges feminism faces (Harquail, 2019a).

Mainstream Entrepreneurship

The term 'entrepreneur' is used to describe an individual who starts and operates their own business (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Entrepreneurship is commonly described as being applicable to all entrepreneurs and gender neutral (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Braidford et al., 2013; Brière et al., 2017; Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015). However, this entrepreneurship is often associated masculinist (i.e. not feminist) economic behaviour and practices (Mirchandani, 1999). Entrepreneurship culture and conversations have standardized 'successful' entrepreneurial characteristics as 'masculine' attributes or men's entrepreneurial successes (Mirchandani, 1999). Mainstream entrepreneurship is also commonly referred to as 'traditional' or 'dominant' entrepreneurship in the literature. Mainstream entrepreneurship models and beliefs have the following characteristics and values:

- They are based in a patriarchal and male-centred ways of thinking and identity (Abbas et al., 2019; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Harquail, 2019a; Orser, 2021), and have internalized assumptions and norms about gender (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Mirchandani, 1999)
- Historically, they have been built on economic exploitation of women's unpaid care and reproductive labour (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015)
- The goal is profit maximization (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Harquail, 2019a)
- They are competitive (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Harquail, 2019a)
- Their behaviours and practices are individual and exclusionary (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Harquail, 2019a; Orser, 2021)
- They are not concerned with social problems or sustainability (do not account for climate impacts, income or systemic gender inequality) (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015)

Many people think of entrepreneurship as a disembodied activity (Brière et al., 2017) that is disconnected from political and social spheres. However, entrepreneurship is socially, culturally, and politically situated and contextually based (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Cornet & Constantinidis, 2004; Henry et al., 2016). This perspective on mainstream entrepreneurship reinforces many of the barriers and structures that maintain gender inequality. How we define, frame, and understand entrepreneurship matters, and has an impact on the policies and institutional supports for entrepreneurs (Morton et al., 2020). Many activists, entrepreneurs, and



writers are drawing attention to the need to move beyond our current ways of thinking about entrepreneurship, the language that we use, and how it is represented in society (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Calas et al., 2009; Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Harquail, 2019a; Mutch, 2022).

Critically, women and gender-diverse people who are running their own businesses may also not identify themselves as entrepreneurs (Bobiwash, 2020, p. 12), let alone feminist entrepreneurs, and may instead relate more to the concept of self-employment.

Feminist Entrepreneurship

Summary

- The type of feminism in “feminist entrepreneurship” matters.
- Feminist entrepreneurship is collective, inclusive, and transformational (Harquail, 2019b)
- There is a lack of diversity in the sources on feminist entrepreneurship, but this may indicate that knowledge and resources are shared in less conventional ways.
- Feminist entrepreneurship goes beyond women’s entrepreneurship and self-employment and applies a feminist lens to entrepreneurial and business theories and everyday practices.
- Many women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are redefining and changing the way we think about work, the enterprise, and entrepreneurship.
- Some entrepreneurial practices and sources that are not self-defined as ‘feminist entrepreneurship’ still embody feminist values and qualities.
- In practice, feminist entrepreneurship has feminist values and principles integrated throughout all aspects of business.

Feminist entrepreneurship as we know it is at a crossroads. Our review demonstrates that as a society, we often think about feminism and entrepreneurship from a patriarchal and male-centred perspective. At the same time, there are also organizations, advocates, and business leaders who are practicing entrepreneurship with feminist values and qualities. Feminist entrepreneurship has emerged as a way to challenge the dominant economic and social structures that were not made for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, and to actively work towards change, ending sexism, exploitation, and oppression (Harquail, 2020). As P. K. Mutch (2022) shares, “feminist entrepreneurship remains an ignored outlier, and is a practice not just an idea.”

Table 2 highlights the differences between mainstream (as described above) and feminist forms of entrepreneurship.

Table 2: Comparison of Mainstream and Feminist Entrepreneurship


Criteria	Mainstream Entrepreneurship	Feminist Entrepreneurship
Details	Patriarchal, male-centred thinking and identity in business.	Embeds feminist mindset, principles and values in all parts of business, and aims to end sexism, exploitation, and oppression.
Values	Profit maximization, individual practices and success	Collective, inclusive (and intersectional), transformational (Harquail, 2019b)
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition • Exclusion • Extraction, not focused on social issues / sustainability • “Othering” women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminist business structure, culture, mission, governance, product or service, revenue model, etc. • Challenges economic and social structures that were not made for women and gender-diverse people • Changes/ redefines work, the enterprise, and entrepreneurship

In Theory

Orser and Leck (2010) first introduced the concept of the ‘feminist entrepreneur’ in Canada in 2010. Shortly after, in 2011 Orser, Elliot and Leck (2011) developed the concept of ‘entrepreneurial feminism’ further. ‘Feminist entrepreneurship’ has emerged alongside these two concepts in the literature.

Feminist entrepreneurs are defined as change agents who exemplify entrepreneurial acumen in the creation of equity-based outcomes that improve women’s quality of life and well-being through innovative products, services, and processes (Orser et al., 2011, p. 562).

Feminist entrepreneurs have similarly been called a force of change (FasterCapital, 2023) and actively political (Mutch, 2022). In their initial writing, Orser and Leck (2010) describe the differences between classic, contemporary, social, and feminist entrepreneurs. They highlighted that classic entrepreneurs embodied stereotypical masculine attributes such as competitive relationships and personal financial gain. Feminist entrepreneurs had **feminine** attributes such as shared decision-making and power, cooperative relationships, and social innovation. Social and feminist entrepreneurs may have some overlapping values and practices but are not the same. Social entrepreneurs still have more masculine attributes and did not use a feminist approach, while contemporary entrepreneurs had more feminine attributes.



Later, Orser, Elliot, and Leck (2011) examined how feminist attributes are expressed in the entrepreneurial identities of self-identified “feminist entrepreneurs.” Critically, the 2011 study found that “feminist entrepreneurs do not perceive themselves as typically portrayed in feminist literature” (Orser et al., 2011, p. 562) and that the feminist entrepreneurial identity reflects some, but not all, attributes that are often associated with women entrepreneurs.

Many feminist entrepreneurs are motivated by inequality (Orser & Elliott, 2015), and take entrepreneurial action to create wealth and social change based on feminist values (Mutch, 2018a). As Orser and Elliot (2015, p. 58) expand in their book, feminist enterprises are often “motivated by humanitarian or feminist outcomes such as improving the quality of life and well-being of others, particularly making change for the betterment of girls and women.”

Entrepreneurial feminism is a mindset and portfolio of strategies (Harquail, 2020) that incorporates feminist values and principles in business endeavours, venture creations, and entrepreneurship policies (Orser, 2021; Orser et al., 2020). Feminist entrepreneurship, as explained by C.V. Harquail in a Feminist Business Model Canvas webinar, brings together an action-oriented [lean entrepreneurship approach](#), feminist organizational and business theories and history, and feminist social justice and anti-oppression orientations and commitments (Harquail, 2020).

As demonstrated throughout this literature review, the ‘type’ of feminism matters. According to Orser (2022, p. 471) “entrepreneurial feminism differs from neo-liberal, psychoanalytic and radical feminist theories by focusing on enacting socio-economic change.” Harquail (2020) states that white feminism is not the feminism that should be referenced. Harquail (2019b) advocates that feminist entrepreneurs draw on (her definition of) “collective, inclusive, and transformational feminism”.


Collective Roots

Harquail (2020) identifies collective feminism to be critical to the feminist entrepreneurship that they support. In this sense, feminist entrepreneurship draws on the wisdom of all streams of feminism (Harquail, 2020). This includes honouring the diverse goals and intentions of diverse feminists (Harquail, 2020), and actively re-envisioning feminism with other feminisms that have historically been suppressed, erased, or eclipsed by white feminism (Zakaria, 2021).

Intersectional and Inclusive

The ‘feminism’ in feminist entrepreneurship includes diverse gendered identities (Orser, 2021), bringing in the experiences and perspectives of racialized and under-represented diverse entrepreneurs, and amplifying their voices, priorities, values, and needs (Harquail, 2020). This includes actively seeking to “identify inefficient entrepreneurial ecosystem norms and practices” that marginalize entrepreneurs, particularly racialized, disabled, immigrant, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people (Orser et al., 2020, p. 367). Intersectionality is important here as it helps us to recognize the linked oppressions diverse entrepreneurs face (Mutch, 2022).

To abolish white feminism and build a world in which all can flourish, we need to fully grasp the history, contours, and consequences of these distinct forms of feminism. Resisting white feminism’s attempts to bury or co-opt intersectionality, emptying it of its true force, requires listening to the Black



feminists who have developed its theory and the coalition of feminists who have developed its politics (Schuller, 2021, p. 19).

This literature review finds that there is a lack of representation of diverse entrepreneurs writing about feminist entrepreneurship. Critically, this does not mean that diverse entrepreneurs are not actively defining and practicing feminist entrepreneurship principles. Rather, knowledge and resources may be shared in different formats such as networking events or stories. Important concepts may go by different names but share common principles with feminist entrepreneurship. Many diverse entrepreneurs are already practicing feminist entrepreneurship without calling it by its name (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2023b). However, we also find that writing on feminist entrepreneurship is less common than that on women’s entrepreneurship and self-employment. There are also major differences in how it is represented in theory, practice, and location.

Transformational

Feminist entrepreneurs are acting as “change agents as they re-create rules of the marketplace to make up for historical subjugation of diverse women” (Orser et al., 2020, p. 366). Further, this type of feminism in entrepreneurship aims to transform societal norms and culture (Brière et al., 2017; Harquail, 2020; FasterCapital, 2023; Salsón et al., 2023). Creating a new entrepreneurial culture is a common reference in the sources we reviewed (Brière et al., 2017; Salsón et al., 2023). Within this new culture, some transformations may include sharing collective resources, co-creation, balance, and regeneration (Harquail, 2020; Coralus, 2024).

As part of the transformation of business thinking, Harquail (2019) finds that feminists are redefining “work” by:

- Making more kinds of work visible and equally valuable,
- Challenging the idea that types of work can be conceptualized as separate when they are inextricably connected,
- Challenging the ways that some effortful activity in the workplace counts as “work” while other essential activity does not,
- Questioning why who does the work influences whether that work is recognized, and
- Questioning how we value work versus other life activities.

As much of the writing about women’s entrepreneurship highlights, there is a need to rethink the foundations of entrepreneurship and how feminism fits into this. Mutch (2022) argues we must “think deeply about alternative ideas for enterprises, considering radical and subversive ideas / writers.”

Mutch (2021, 2022) calls for an overhaul and transformation of our current programming, education, and economic system led by women and diverse entrepreneurs, and to create a “gender-just and care-centred economy.” Several sources focus on feminist entrepreneurs and business owners being change-makers and advocates for change and societal transformation with “bottom-up” leadership.



In Practice

The concept of feminist entrepreneurship is not new (Harquail, 2022; Mutch, 2022; Phipps, 2021). Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs have been practicing feminism and intersectionality in their businesses for centuries. As Phipps (2021) highlights, Black women entrepreneurs such as Maggie Lena Walker, Annie Turnbo Malone, and Madam C. J. Walker all employed feminist and intersectional practices in their businesses in the 1800s such as supporting women's home ownership, education, and employment. Harquail (2022) also finds that a lot of feminist businesses and cooperatives emerged in the 1960s and 70s as women found creative ways to support themselves and promote feminist values. The feminist entrepreneurship community has grown as "an informal, intergenerational, diverse, international group of brave pioneers," globally, extending beyond entrepreneurs to include feminist thought leaders, academics, activists, and artists as a community of practice (Mutch, 2022).

However, it is still challenging to define a business or entrepreneur as feminist. Harquail (2022) outlines that a feminist business will have unique leaders and members, organization (structure, process, culture), intent, ownership and governance, products or services, revenue model, and connection with the feminist community.


Complex Identities

Feminist entrepreneurial identities are constructed, just like all entrepreneurial identities (Elliott et al., 2021; Warren, 2004). Self-identified feminist entrepreneurs are multifaceted, "action-oriented, creative thinkers/problem solvers, visionary, and determined" (Orser et al., 2011, p. 580). Feminist entrepreneurial identity is expressed in acts of networking, marketing, branding, and resource acquisition (Elliott & Orser, 2018). Their values are translated into their businesses (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023b) along with passion, joy, and care (Mutch, 2022; Orser et al., 2011; Orser & Elliott, 2015). These identities challenge and undermine mainstream and idealized entrepreneurial models and perceptions (Orser, 2022, p. 471). This is not uncommon of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs already. For example, Knight (2016) investigates the complexity and experiences of women entrepreneurs of Afro-Caribbean descent in Ontario, Canada through an intersectional and interlocking systems of oppression framework. The study finds that "Black women negotiate not only their bodies but the discursive categories of self-employed and entrepreneur" through creative and subversive processes of resistance (Knight, 2016, p. 322).

Values

Aligned with feminist values, feminist businesses prioritize people and planet, and are not extractive (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023b; Harquail, 2022; Mutch, 2022) As Harquail (2019) outlines, feminism's core business values include equality, agency, whole humanness, interdependence, and generativity. It is already well documented that women entrepreneurs are more likely to emphasize social and/or environmental value creation (Hechavarria et al., 2012) and embed principles of sustainability into their enterprises (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a).

Feminist entrepreneurs are committed to creating opportunities for other women, promoting diversity, and social change (FasterCapital, 2023). For example, Indigenous women



entrepreneurs actively create jobs for other Indigenous women, prioritize reciprocity and give back to their communities (Bobiwash, 2020; Morton et al., 2020). Black women entrepreneurs also utilize entrepreneurship as a vehicle to meet community needs, including gaps in products and services (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021). This commitment can permeate all business aspects but comes through most notably in socially and environmentally friendly revenue models that may be net-positive, regenerative, and/or distributing value and impact fairly (Harquail, 2022).

Organizational Design and Culture

The structure and culture of feminist businesses support these values, as well as collaboration and the flattening of power hierarchies (Salsón et al., 2023). Feminist organizations create different *building blocks* of systems and practices that are non-bureaucratic, collective, and democratic in decision-making (Harquail, 2019a, p. 106). Notably, many women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs favour collaboration and partnership (ESG UQAM, 2021). Hiring and staffing practices are great examples of this, as highlighted by feminist entrepreneurs in a 2023 panel webinar by the Canadian Women's Foundation. In the webinar, feminist entrepreneurs shared that they hired and mentored under-represented groups and prioritized diversity with partners and collaborators (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023a). The panelists also aimed to create sustainable and supportive employment environments. Many aimed to challenge the typical '9-5' work structure. The feminist entrepreneurs also placed value on informal education and self-taught employee knowledge, adapting and building roles around skills and passions. The entrepreneurs in the webinar also identified that they honoured and prioritized motherhood, family, kinship, and the self in their business structures. This is also reflected in other sources, as feminists are working to redefine the work-life dilemma, and identifying new types of care work, emotional labour, and relational work (Harquail, 2019a). Feminist entrepreneurs challenge how we think about the marketplace, and the "patriarchal structuring of our understanding of work itself," as a way to address gender inequality and value women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs experiences (Harquail, 2019a, p. 86).

Value Creation in Products and Services

The products or services offered by feminist entrepreneurs are thoughtful, generative, and working to advance collective flourishing (Harquail, 2020; Harquail, 2022). For example, multiple feminist entrepreneurs have products or services that contribute to enabling other women and diverse entrepreneurs, or non-profit organizations to do their work through branding, platform, or skill development (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023a).

Our literature review also finds that some feminist entrepreneurs are operating as innovators (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2023a; ESG UQAM, 2021; Neufeld, 2020), but they are reimagining what this means, while other feminist entrepreneurs are in favour of slow processes and dismantling the *cutting-edge innovation* and *growth* mindsets (Salsón et al., 2023). This begs the question: how do we internalize mainstream definitions of entrepreneurship (Zambrano Vargas et al., 2020)? It also points to many different approaches to challenging or changing this mindset. Some best practices identified as these values are translated into products and services are inclusive communication, prioritizing accessibility, questioning language, humility, and showing empathy (Picard, 2022).



Understanding and Evaluating

As Elliot and Orser (2018) find, feminist entrepreneurs sometimes have to make strategic compromises to reconcile their feminist values with business objectives. So how do we 'measure' and/or understand *how feminist* a business is (Harquail, 2022)? According to Harquail (2020), we should rethink the concept of measurement, and instead ask: how we can track, nourish, and create accountability in feminist entrepreneurship? Harquail (2022) proposes the feminist dimensions of businesses as a tool to help organizations recognize where they have opportunities to grow. Orser and Elliot (2015) similarly highlight that feminist entrepreneurs have feminist governance, performance measures and impacts on society. There is a need to move towards new ways of thinking about the performance of businesses created by women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs (Brière et al., 2017). Who defines success in this space is also important. Is success defined by mainstream standards, by feminist values, or by individual cases? A holistic and explicitly feminist approach to monitoring and evaluation that actively works towards change may be helpful in this context (Podems, 2010).

Ecosystem Considerations

The macro and meso level players of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (such as governments, policies, financial institutions, and enterprise support organizations) impact how feminist entrepreneurship operates. Based on extensive evidence and evaluation, we know that building upon social, financial, human, personal, and physical assets through holistic, positive, and long-term outcome-oriented approaches has led to successful development of the enterprises of women living in poverty in Canada and positive social and economic returns (Murray et al., 2010; Murray & Ferguson, 2001, 2002). Developing women's enterprises and supporting self-employment of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs living in poverty requires promoting multiple and complementary dimensions of assets and respecting the diversity and complexity of women's lives (Murray & Ferguson, 2001). Intersectional, patient, and holistic practices that build upon relationships can lead to a greater understanding of diverse entrepreneurs (Richard & Thorvaldson, 2022). Addressing and changing how this happens within different levels is a challenge. A feminist entrepreneurship approach to policy and economic development should also extend to other areas of policy such as accessible childcare and transportation. Intersectional considerations must also be positioned at the heart of policy design (Orser, 2022). More attention can be focused on financial spheres to transformational feminist approaches that are "proactively addressing structural causes and economic norms through collective digital agency" (Orser et al., 2020, p. 380).

Feminism in Canada's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Summary

- Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are presented from a deficit perspective and are often 'othered.'

- Most research focuses on the experiences, motivations, and values of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs. However, studies do not often use feminist or intersectional approaches.
- Self-employment is often included in the sources on women's entrepreneurship but has many differences in practice.
- Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are continuously negotiating their entrepreneurial identities in different contexts.
- A lot of the feminism in public and online spaces, education, public policy, financial institutions, and support organizations is 'washed' or watered down.
- Policy support for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs in Canada is individualistic and rooted in neoliberalism, even when called 'feminist.'
- Financial institutions have deeply embedded barriers for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, which are compounded for under-represented entrepreneurs.
- The Canadian entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a friendly space for feminist entrepreneurship practices.


Women's Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment

Gender subtexts discursively operate – albeit in different ways – towards a common process of 'othering' women entrepreneurs and rendering hegemonic masculinity invisible (Bruni et al., 2004, p. 260).

Within the writing on entrepreneurship, women's entrepreneurship is thought of as separate or 'othered' (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Bruni et al., 2004; Henry et al., 2016). Mainstream entrepreneurship approaches and discussions limit our current understanding of women's entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Mainstream entrepreneurship language creates a gender subtext (Bruni et al., 2004) and deficit perspective (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Bruni et al., 2004). Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are presented as "lacking in status, networks, and credibility", which structures "social perceptions of institutional actors and shapes their discriminatory, often unintentional, behaviour" (Bruni et al., 2004, p. 263). It is assumed that women and other folks from marginalized or racialized groups "who cannot fit into this discourse require 'fixing' through specific interventions to address this assumed deficit" (Ahl & Marlow, 2012, p. 2). This separation and limited understanding is reflected in education, policy, institutions, and research studies conducted on women's entrepreneurship.

This discourse, while talked about in enthusiastic terms, does women a disfavor. The entrepreneurship discourse is not a vehicle for women's liberation. It is a tool that maintains the status quo in terms of women's position in society, and it preserves the present power relationships between men and women (Ahl, 2004, p. 176).

The idea of self-employment is often considered alongside or applied instead of entrepreneurship. Self-employment refers to being employed by oneself and working independently, rather than being employed by someone else. Despite these differences,



definitions of entrepreneurship in Canadian contexts often include women's self-employment along with women who own and operate small and medium enterprises (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; Jakobsh & Boskov, 2020; Richard, 2021).

In Canada, women make up approximately 37% of self-employed entrepreneurs, which is 26% higher than forty years ago (Statistics Canada, 2023). Approximately 55% of women entrepreneurs are self-employed rather than majority owners of incorporated businesses (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023b). In Quebec, women represent nearly 40% of entrepreneurs, and women's self-employment grew by 23.3% from 2007-2019 (versus 4.2% for men) (ESG UQAM, 2021). These numbers may change as Canada's self-employment rate is declining due to the pandemic, strong labour markets, and inflation, and self-employment has become less attractive to younger generations (Leach, 2023).


A study by Statistics Canada (2023) finds that the same gender-specific labour market segregation that existed in the 1980s, still exists today. Notably, three of the five most common occupations held by women in the 1980s and in 2022 are the same: retail and wholesale trade managers, early childhood educators, and hairstylists. This indicates that we continue to see self-employed women overrepresented in female-dominated occupations (Statistics Canada, 2023). Women are also more likely to work alone, rather than to have paid employees (OECD, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2023). For example, 80% of self-employed women in comparison to 68% of self-employed men had no employees (Statistics Canada, 2023). This can potentially lead to a lack of scaling in women-owned businesses (OECD, 2017).

Recent research by the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) (2023a, p. 3, 37) finds that "women entrepreneurs tend to be concentrated in some sectors and under-represented in others," with both women-owned SMEs and self-employed women being most present in retail trade, professional, scientific, and technical sectors. Women are less likely to be in the primary (raw material extraction/production) and industrial sectors. However, an intersectional perspective is critical to understanding the differences within, between, and across identities.

Intersectional identities deeply shape women's entrepreneurial experiences, which are often linked to compounded systemic barriers (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023, p. 62).

A lot of recent women's entrepreneurship literature is centred on barriers to access for women and under-represented groups, characteristics and demographics, motivations, and experiences. Studies are focused on independent profiles, and attitudes or experiences of women entrepreneurs' barriers (Cornet & Constantinidis, 2004). According to Christina Constantinidis (ESG UQAM, 2021), most research still focuses on the barriers that women encounter and the characteristics of female entrepreneurs. Research often compares male - female entrepreneurship in large-scale, quantitative studies that neglect sector-specific and within-group analysis (Henry et al., 2016). The findings from our literature review support these claims within Canadian contexts.

In Canada, several studies have been conducted on the experiences, motivations, and values of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022, 2022; Jakobsh & Boskov, 2020; Morton et al., 2020). Influential program evaluation work by Murray and Ferguson (2001) highlighted that women are motivated



to choose self-employment to make changes in their lives and earn more. Women who chose to take part in self-employment programming shared that they chose to find alternative working arrangements due to health problems or disabilities (Murray & Ferguson, 2001). What Murray and Ferguson found in 2001 is still relevant today:

Women generally don't compartmentalize life priorities; they view their lives holistically and can't give full attention to their work until they sort out their pressing personal and environmental problems. We need to remind ourselves constantly that women's families take top priority. This is one of the reasons why they may often choose self-employment. Flexibility and control of work hours can serve as a powerful answer to the continuous demands of childrearing and the household, and often lead to home-based income-earning strategies (Murray & Ferguson, 2001, p. 25).


As Mutch (2021) highlights, approximately a quarter of women pursued entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic out of necessity. Entrepreneurship is an avenue to generate income while providing in-home childcare and when standard employment is not a possibility (Mutch, 2021).

WEKH and associated organizations are spearheading more recent studies to better understand the unique experiences and motivations of Indigenous (Jakobsh & Boskov, 2020; A. Richard, 2021; Richard & Thorvaldson, 2022), racialized (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Elmi et al., 2021), disabled (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022), immigrant (Cisneros et al., 2021), and 2SLGBTQIA+ (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a) women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs through an intersectional lens. However, as highlighted by WEKH, there is still a lack of research on the motivations of women and gender-diverse people with disabilities to become entrepreneurs, or about their experiences (Caldwell et al., 2016; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022).

There are also significant differences and additional barriers within and between racialized and minority groups of women who are self-employed. Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurship studies lack the critical lenses that consider structural issues, and therefore risk perpetuating gender disadvantage without "problematizing the status quo assumptions, social norms, and structural barriers present in the entrepreneurial ecosystem" (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015, p. 30). At the societal level, the stereotypes and norms of entrepreneurship play a role in policy and programming. Canadian financial institutions also determine access to financing, which was identified as a major barrier to Black, Indigenous, and diverse entrepreneurs (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Bobiwash, 2020; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a).

Our society and economy does not recognize or accommodate women's values, priorities, or family caretaking responsibilities. Women's economic options are severely constrained by the choices they are forced to make while attempting to meet their multiple responsibilities (Murray et al., 2010, p. iv).

Our literature review reveals that the dominant and masculinist structure and processes of these institutions impede women's uptake and usage. Further, many entrepreneurship support programs and initiatives often are not targeted and do not work to meet the diverse needs of



entrepreneurs (Bobiwash, 2020; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; A. Richard, 2021; Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a). For example,

1% of Canadian SMEs are owned by people living with a disability (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023b).

In Canada, immigrant women are one-half as likely to become business owners as immigrant men (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a, p. 75).

About 37% of all 2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs (including agender, nonbinary, transgender, and cisgender individuals) choose not to be public with their identities to avoid discrimination (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022, p. v).

Indigenous women face significant barriers when accessing western financial services due to systemic exclusion that prevents them from meeting basic approval criteria (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a, p. 4).


Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs' identity is also constructed and reconstructed in different contexts (Elliott et al., 2021; Knight, 2016; Warren, 2004). Warren (2004) finds that women must work to legitimize themselves as professionals in certain communities of practice. Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs in Canada are actively engaged in "ongoing identity work to negotiate their entrepreneurial identities in a socio-cultural context of conflicting discourses about womanhood and entrepreneurship" (Elliott et al., 2021, p. 53).

Social Norms

Deeply embedded ideas about feminism and capitalism impact how feminist entrepreneurship is shaped and perceived by society, and its potential for growth in many directions. Instead of feminist entrepreneurship, we often see women's entrepreneurship or approaches from (neo)liberal, popular, and white feminism (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Porém et al., 2023).

Critiques of feminism and capitalism that have emerged over the past few decades are still relevant to the current discussion. According to Song (2014), neoliberalism serves to exacerbate sexism and oppression, and the idea of feminism itself is incompatible with capitalism. Feminism has also been criticized as becoming the "handmaiden" of capitalism and individualism due to the history of its entanglements with neoliberal efforts and the ambivalence of the concept (IELA, 2017).

Both the neoliberal discourse and the hegemonic discourse of entrepreneurial culture aimed at women evoke the construction of a female subjectivity that follows the normativity of individualism, competition and self-management as a high-performance company. Gender equality, in this context, is tied to open spaces within capitalism itself. Meritocracy, hard work, the responsibility of women for their life path, their financial performance and positions are turned to indicators of empowerment and reduction of gender inequality (Porém et al., 2023, p. 187, translated from Brazilian Portuguese).



When feminism is present, it may be ‘washing’ feminism, in which the term ‘feminism’ is attached to a business or entrepreneurial endeavour for marketing purposes (Picard, 2022). For example, women-focused capital funds are often pinkwashed, meaning that they are often additions to mainstream programming positioned to create individual wealth rather than created to enhance equity or counter structural barriers (Orser et al., 2020). Critically, this takes place in a digital space where technology can “both challenge or reinforce structural constraints that impede women entrepreneurs” (Orser et al., 2020, p. 364).

The feminist entrepreneurship that we see online and in social media frequently present women as extensions of their company (Porém et al., 2023). As Rottenburg (2019) writes, through popular culture and books such as *Women Who Work* by Ivanka Trump, we come to see the self as an enterprise, and value is placed on self-investment and individualism. This can often reinforce entrepreneurial culture with neoliberal feminism, which supports how women can overcome gender barriers through awareness of their individual capabilities (Porém et al., 2023). This likely occurs because neoliberal and individualistic feminism is more palatable and acceptable in society (Porém et al., 2023; Rottenberg, 2019).

Neoliberal feminism in no way constitutes a threat to the powers that be. It effectively defangs feminism of its oppositional force by individualizing and responsabilizing women and by helping neoliberal rationality resolve one of its constitutive tensions by maintaining a distinctive lexicon of reproduction and care work. Simultaneously, the notion of a happy work–family balance helps render this variant of feminism palatable and legitimate, enabling neoliberal feminism's widespread embrace and circulation within the Anglo-American mainstream cultural landscape (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 1080).

The applications of feminist theories in entrepreneurial research are “absent, or watered down to something only concerning individuals” (Ahl, 2004, p. 172) and few researchers are interested in feminist epistemologies (Henry et al., 2016). Entrepreneurship research has also been found to reproduce normative conditions, even when oriented towards women’s benefits (Calas et al., 2009). Research must move beyond the just recommending education and training to *fix* women (Foss et al., 2019). Research must account for contextual and institutional dimensions of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to improve the environment for women’s entrepreneurship (Foss et al., 2019). There is a clear need to re-engage with feminism (Calas et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2010) through relational, post-structural (Ahl, 2004; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Henry et al., 2016; Knight, 2016), intersectional (Knight, 2016), and other feminist approaches.

Although not called ‘feminist entrepreneurship,’ there are other gender-related approaches utilized in the literature that call attention to these challenges, such as Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+). Additionally, some approaches such as gender-smart, (University of Ottawa, 2023) and gender-integrated, utilize intersectional and feminist language (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015). Holistic livelihood approaches (Murray et al., 2010; Murray & Ferguson, 2001, 2002) and systemic perspectives (Cornet & Constantinidis, 2004) that centre gender and diverse experiences in society are also interconnected with the roots of feminist entrepreneurship.



In Government and Policy


The literature we analyzed to better understand Canada's landscape for feminist entrepreneurship includes works on diverse women's entrepreneurship in policy, financing, and practices. We find that the majority of reports from financial institutions, government, and women's entrepreneurship organizations do not commonly utilize the term 'feminist entrepreneurship,' although some apply the concepts of 'feminism' and/or 'intersectionality' to varying degrees. Instead, most documents analyzed utilize the term 'women's entrepreneurship' and generalize 'self-employment' as part of this. Some reports and articles from major Canadian government and financial institutions do not consider gender in their approaches at all. Statistics Canada, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), are noted for an absence of explicitly intersectional or feminist-focused approaches in key studies related to women and diverse entrepreneurs.

Government and policy shape "opportunities for women in general and women entrepreneurs in particular, as it affects everything from financing to access to infrastructure," while also being impacted by global forces (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022, p. 37). However, self-employed women and diverse entrepreneurs are often forgotten in discussions and policy solutions for small-medium enterprises (Mutch, 2021; Sultana & Ravanera, 2020). This literature review finds that the government and policy support for feminist entrepreneurship in particular is sparse, and support for women's entrepreneurship follows social and cultural norms and understandings of entrepreneurship that are outlined above. This is supported by research on gender bias embedded in society's norms, institutions and values at the macro level (Cukier, Gagnon, et al., 2022; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022).

The sources we reviewed indicate the presence of liberal feminist policy support for women entrepreneurs (Orser, 2017; T. Richard, 2022). Richard (2022) finds that the Government of Canada's language on women's entrepreneurship strategy and policy reinforces gender roles that are aligned with classic liberal feminist strategies. In general, "one size fits all" policies do not work and there is a need to consider contexts and institutions in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Foss et al., 2019). Notably, entrepreneurial feminism is constrained due to the "current myopic focus on women's entrepreneurship policy fails to recognize alternative outcomes for venture creation such as these" (T. Richard, 2022, p. 34). For more information on government and policy, see [Appendix 2](#).

Financial Institutions

Institutional and financing perspectives on entrepreneurship impact feminist entrepreneurship in Canada. Recent reports identify the systemic factors that influence barriers to financing women and diverse entrepreneurs (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; Orser et al., 2019). Despite new targeted programs and funds, "significant barriers remain embedded in the systems, policies, and processes of financial institutions" (Cukier, Gagnon, et al., 2022, p. vii). These structural, systemic, and institutional barriers are compounded for under-represented entrepreneurs, and are often mutually reinforcing (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Jakobsh & Boskov, 2020; Morton et al., 2020; A. Richard, 2021). For example, inequities have been found across



Aboriginal Finance Institutions (Morton et al., 2020), and only 4 of the 59 Aboriginal Finance Institutions have specific supports in place to support Indigenous women (Bobiwash, 2020, p. 5). Exclusive funder performance criteria, limited agency cooperation and fragmentation may also be challenges (Orser et al., 2019). An example of this may be the Five C's model of capacity, collateral, capital, character, and conditions, that are used in the processes of making financing decisions (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022).

More than 80 percent of Black women entrepreneurs have used personal financing to fund their businesses (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021, p. i).


There is also a lack of awareness, visibility, and access to information about funding and financing opportunities and programs by the BDC and other major sources, notably for Black and Indigenous women (Black Business and Professional Association et al., 2021; Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2023b; Morton et al., 2020). Women entrepreneurs are rejected for a perceived lack of industry experience and management capacity, the 'type' of business they own, their household finances and insufficient collateral, and are frequently ranked lower than men for leadership, readiness, and risk-taking (Knight, 2016; OECD, 2017). Knight (2016) notes that "for those who manage to pass through these stringent criteria and get a loan, they are often faced with higher interest rates, mandatory collateral and more frequently require a co-signer on loans and lines of credit."

Women entrepreneurs in Canada receive just 4% of venture capital funding available (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020, p. 13).

This literature review also locates a potential disconnect and challenge in the recent attention given to women's venture capital initiatives such as the Women's Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative and the BDC Women in Technology Venture Fund. Although the gap between men and women's representation in venture capital funding is well documented, (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2023a; OECD, 2017; Sultana & Ravanera, 2020) increased funding may not be the answer. Venture capital in Canada is male dominated with significant gender biases, and venture capital funds are not conducive to the types of businesses women own (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020). It is estimated that federal programs such as "the Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund, the Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative, the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, and the Ecosystem Fund were all used by at most 3% of women entrepreneurs" (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2023b, p. 14). This may be due to the application criteria not matching or being relevant to women's endeavors, such as in the case of the BDC (Orser et al., 2020).

Presently, there are more than 47 mainstream incubator programs operating in the province of Ontario (Over 8000 across the globe; less than 10% are women-centered in the U.S.) and not one of them touches on feminist business practice as an opportunity to develop alternative ways of designing, funding, and operating successful ventures (Mutch, 2018b).

Accelerators, incubators, and innovation spaces have become popular solutions for women's entrepreneurial growth in Canada (Mutch, 2018b). Incubators and business support organizations may not meet the needs of women entrepreneurs or diverse women, especially



those with a technology orientation (Cukier, Gagnon, et al., 2022, p. viii). Additionally, incubators may be exclusionary of self-employment in only accepting incorporated businesses. Incubators and accelerators have also been linked to hegemonic perspectives about entrepreneurship, and criticized for promoting immediacy that is disconnected from reality and social contexts (Salsón et al., 2023). Incubation literature is often a gender blind “process shaping the identity work undertaken by women seeking legitimacy as technology venturers” (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 791). Alternative incubators and accelerators that are community-based, intersectional, and culturally relevant have emerged to validate alternative options, but frequently do not receive government or corporate support (Mutch, 2018b).


The purpose of incubation is ostensibly to encourage and empower entrepreneurial ambition. When analyzed through a gendered perspective however, this process is annotated and filtered which, in effect, limits legitimacy to those who can recognize and are able to reproduce specific scripts. Future research exploring incubation must acknowledge these physical spaces as socially biased contexts which reproduce institutionalized prejudices regarding assessments of eligible and legitimate incumbents (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 810).

This literature review also locates reports and frameworks from financial institutions that are challenging the social norms of financing. There is emerging potential in women-focused capital funds to disrupt “the status quo of institutional investment by constructing grassroots, communities of interest and by amassing gender-focused investors and growth-oriented women-owned enterprises” (Orser et al., 2020, p. 380). For example, the Canadian Women’s Foundation (2023b) is also one of the only organizations within Canada to outline practices of feminist funding in Canada. Raven Indigenous Capital Partners utilize the Raven Indigenous Measurement Framework (n.d., p. 5) to honour Indigenous Knowledges and “decolonize and reculturalize the impact measurement and investment process and inspire our journey towards economic reconciliation and good relationship.” Although this is not a feminist measurement framework specifically, there is much to be learned about alternative approaches to financing.

Educational and Enterprise Support Organizations

Canada is home to an extensive network of enterprise support organizations with programming for women and diverse entrepreneurs. There are several educational programs for entrepreneurs that provide support in training, mentorship, networking, financing, tools, and resources but not necessarily in ‘feminist’ entrepreneurship. Critically, this literature review finds that several pioneering women’s entrepreneurship organizations within this space do not openly call themselves feminist, and/or do not offer tools or services rooted in feminist principles. Feminist Entrepreneurship in Canada is championed by only a few educational and support networks for women entrepreneurs. Understandings and ‘scale’ of support for feminist entrepreneurship may vary. Many networks and educational resources do not even reference feminist entrepreneurship, but several do utilize ‘gender’ lenses or perspectives which are not equivalent to feminist.

Mainstream entrepreneurship educational programming in Canada has excluded gender (Richard & Thorvaldson, 2022; Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a) and reflected




government priorities (Pinto, 2014). This type of programming “locates problems in individuals and schools rather than government policy, and the failure of businesses in Canada to generate meaningful jobs with opportunities for success” (Pinto, 2014). Within school systems, this programming often operates under the logic that young people will learn and then grow to be entrepreneurial (Pinto, 2014). This again places and reinforces the responsibility of the individual and diminishes the importance of lived experiences and the broader context. A critical gap and absence of gender perspectives has been located in programs for Indigenous entrepreneurs, notably in grants, and funding, but also in mentoring and toolkits (Richard & Thorvaldson, 2022; Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a).

Women are continually underrepresented in Canadian post-secondary education spaces and business schools, especially in the study of entrepreneurship (Elliott et al., 2021). Students are now utilizing more gender-inclusive vocabularies of entrepreneurship and androgynous perceptions of a ‘successful’ entrepreneur (Elliott et al., 2021). However, recent research suggests that ‘feminine’ were not ranked as highly by students, indicating that *if* there is a shift in entrepreneurial stereotypes and understandings - that it is occurring slowly and still faces challenges (Elliott et al., 2021, p. 63). Within college and university programming, Orser’s work on feminist entrepreneurship with the University of Ottawa Telfer School of Management, and the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub associated with the Ted Rogers School of Management stand out for intersectional entrepreneurship advocacy.

Only a few Canadian initiatives and organizations adopt explicitly feminist lenses in their entrepreneurship training and programming. Rise Asset Development Women+ Entrepreneurship Program utilizes feminist, decolonized, and trauma-informed philosophies to deliver training, mentorship, support and business skill development (Rise Asset Development, 2023). The Canadian Women’s Foundation is also novel in its partnership for feminist entrepreneurship and networking events. However, as these programs are both quite new, it is difficult to use them to analyze how feminist entrepreneurship is utilized in practice.

Major players and organizations are moving towards more *inclusive* and *aware* models and values, which do not necessarily translate into feminist values, foundations, or practice. As part of the scan of literature and resources, we find that only some organizations are using gender-inclusive language or offering inclusive services. For example, Paro Centre for Women’s Enterprise aim is rather to empower women and women-identifying people, strengthen small businesses and community economic development in Ontario through conferences, workshops, and personal/ professional development supports (Paro Centre for Women’s Enterprise, 2023). Coralus (formerly SheEO) aims to take a “radically different” approach to funding women and non-binary entrepreneurs by distributing crowdsourced support (Coralus, 2024). However, the language about this is abstract and does not refer to feminist or intersectional practices. Several major provincial-level organizations do not offer services to gender-diverse entrepreneurs or use inclusive language, which calls into question how present feminist values are within enterprise support organizations.

Tools and toolkits are often developed as accessible and educational resources for entrepreneurs. The Feminist Business Model Canvas and Feminist Business Toolkit (Harquail, 2016) stand out within our literature review for their overtly feminist approach to entrepreneurship, and as a challenge to conventional models. Although this is an American



source, it has been utilized in Canadian contexts (Harquail, 2020). The emerging Gender-Smart Entrepreneurship Education & Training Plus (GEET+) program and toolkit from the University of Ottawa and Barbara Orser is also focusing on inclusive entrepreneurship education and training (University of Ottawa, 2023). However, resources and toolkits that adopt a feminist approach to business development are limited. For example, Richard and Thorvaldson (2022) find that in a study of seven toolkits for Indigenous entrepreneurs, only two had a [gender lens](#). Furthermore, these toolkits often lacked “tangible tools” for use by Indigenous entrepreneurs and provided links to external sources instead of operating as holistic resources (Richard & Thorvaldson, 2022, p. 5).

In online spaces, LiisBeth (now merged with Rabble), led by P. K. Mutch, has been a champion for feminist entrepreneurship, and for sharing knowledge, perspective, and practices. LiisBeth has actively challenged dominant perspectives on entrepreneurship, and advocated for feminist and just enterprises, and economic transformation.

International Perspectives


Summary

- International sources may strengthen our understanding of the concept of feminist entrepreneurship and help us to reframe our thinking about what it could be.
- Mainstream definitions of entrepreneurship (patriarchal, competitive, individualistic) shape women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs' realities globally, and these entrepreneurs often internalize and adopt mainstream perspectives.
- More attention must be given to the specific circumstances and contexts of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs as systems and services were not designed for them.
- Entrepreneurship may have the potential to be an activity of social change and can challenge dominant power structures and social norms; but not in its mainstream form.
- In practice, some international organizations are focusing on holistic, feminist, and balancing approaches to women's entrepreneurship support.

Many sources from outside of Canada consider feminism's relationship with entrepreneurship. Studies also focus on the barriers and characteristics of women entrepreneurs, as well as social norms and perspectives on entrepreneurship. In our review, we identified many similar but also some contextually dependent barriers. For example, across the globe, women-led businesses are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Torres et al., 2021). As revealed at the Feminist Finance Forum, prevailing social norms and discriminatory practices that are entrenched in financial systems globally continue to limit the adoption and use of financial services by women (ESCAP, 2023; Khanady, 2023). According to Cam Do, Director General of the Innovative and Climate Finance Bureau, Global Affairs Canada at the ESCAP Feminist Finance Forum, "feminist finance goes well beyond providing access to services and opportunities. It also involves transforming social norms, power dynamics that exist, and structural barriers that hinder equality" (ESCAP, 2023).

Ojediran and Anderson (2020, p. 11) call attention to the formal *and* informal institutions and socially embedded systems that shape women's business practices. Constraints that are established as normal in society, such as gendered allocation of household responsibilities can restrict financial independence and autonomy, as well as the perceived legitimacy of women's entrepreneurship, and can inhibit growth (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). Another study on how social, cultural, and legal institutions foster entrepreneurship revealed that greater research using feminist viewpoints is necessary because current work does not grasp why there is a low presence of women entrepreneurs in international trade (Akter et al., 2019).

Globally, women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs must often conform to or enact mainstream and 'masculine' entrepreneurship and economic logic, following society's dominant point of view (Hechavarria et al., 2012). Research in Colombia revealed that typical entrepreneurship methods can conceal patriarchal and individualistic beliefs that shape women's realities, and that these practices are often internalized and adopted by women themselves (Zambrano



Vargas et al., 2020). Similarly, Porém and colleagues (2023) conducted a recent study on the Instagram profiles of Brazilian women entrepreneurs to explore the portrayal and expectations of women in entrepreneurial culture, and how feminist entrepreneurship is legitimized in online spaces. This study demonstrated that the way women entrepreneurs were portrayed aligns with neoliberal feminist ideals that emphasize individual capabilities, and that women were positioned as extensions of their companies (Porém et al., 2023). Another Brazilian study found that the entrepreneurship promoted online is disconnected from real-life experiences, and instead creates unrealistic images and meanings that are influenced by neoliberal ideas (Trindade & de Souza, 2020).

The literature we reviewed also indicates that organizations supporting women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs frequently do not consider their specific circumstances and contexts (Brière et al., 2017). Support for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs should utilize more integrated, dynamic, and collective approaches rather than individual (Brière et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs, activists, and writers are challenging the world of entrepreneurship, and exploring spaces of feminist resistance to confront male-dominated and gender-blind perspectives on innovation (Pettersson & Lindberg, 2013; Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2010).

As a concept, entrepreneurship has been reframed as an empowering and subversive activity for women in the Global South (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Ojediran & Anderson, 2020) and as an activity of social change (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Calas et al., 2009). A foundational source by Calás and colleagues (2009) reframes entrepreneurship from a positive economic activity to 'social change' through a feminist lens and calls us to reframe what we consider to be entrepreneurial behaviour. Entrepreneurship also has the potential to be emancipating, as it can challenge dominant power structures, oppression, and social norms that marginalize women's enterprises (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). This is a process that can only work modestly and slowly. However, these perspectives on reframing entrepreneurship are still not common (Brière et al., 2017).

Many feminist entrepreneurs are beginning to redefine entrepreneurial practices and the supporting ecosystem. For example, the Juntas Emprendemos training and support program for women's cooperative entrepreneurial projects in Spain (Salsón et al., 2023) promotes social, supportive, and feminist entrepreneurial culture and collective imagination for change. The programs are geared towards entrepreneurs, but also towards program development and training in methodology. The focus is on creating viable and rewarding businesses that are also balancing economic, social, environmental, and personal elements. Similarly, Incubadora Feminista Latinoamérica is revisiting the role of the incubator and accelerator space to generate economic independence starting from feminism.



Paths Forward

Summary

- There are potential challenges with the concept and roots of feminist entrepreneurship. This may reinforce dominant and oppressive economic systems without further inquiry.
- Feminist entrepreneurship may not be a relevant concept to women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, despite its goal to be inclusive.
- The collective element of feminist entrepreneurship is still unclear, as sources do not yet fully engage with diverse feminisms.
- There is room to build on the idea of transformation in feminist entrepreneurship, and to move away from individualistic ways of thinking.


As our review demonstrates, Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem and culture are not welcoming places for feminist entrepreneurship. There are still gaps in knowledge at both the theoretical and practical level that must be addressed for individuals and institutions to move towards a space where feminist entrepreneurship can flourish.

The sources indicate that there are some potential challenges with the concept and roots of feminist entrepreneurship. We need to ask whether feminism is compatible with entrepreneurship. If it is compatible, how might it reinforce the dominant power structures and systems (IELA, 2017; Song, 2014)? There is still a gap in how feminism and entrepreneurship can be reconciled in this way. International and non-Western perspectives on feminism and entrepreneurial activity may hold some answers (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Brière et al., 2017; Calas et al., 2009). Also, reframing feminist entrepreneurship in Canada more clearly as a vehicle of social transformation, rather than an activity for individual transformation, may be an avenue of further inquiry.

As feminist entrepreneurship aims to centre representation and inclusivity, this leads to deeper questions about the relevance of the concept in general to diverse entrepreneurs, as reflected in the following quote (A. Richard, 2021, p. iii):

It is exhausting for Indigenous women to navigate an entrepreneurship ecosystem that poses barriers around every turn due to the presence of many institutionalized stereotypes and biases. Overarching western cultural values have created a mould for entrepreneurship within which Indigenous women no longer see themselves.

Some writers have recognized that accountability and responsibility for leadership in changemaking should not only be emphasized at the individual level. Changing how society thinks about entrepreneurship is a difficult and complex endeavor. If transformation is an end goal, more research and planning is needed to identify the paths forward, and the role that feminist entrepreneurs will play.



Based on the sources that advocate for feminist entrepreneurship's collective approach, there are a few gaps and areas for more discussion. In feminist writing, 'collective' feminism is often positioned as collective action connected to solidarity (Green, 2020; Sweetman, 2013). Re-engaging with what collectivity and collective action means in feminism and entrepreneurship may illuminate how the 'collective' feminism in feminist entrepreneurship can be strengthened and support solidarity. A feminist collective action approach is also at odds with the individualism, washing, and neoliberal feminisms found in our review. As Alkhaled (2021) points out in criticism of earlier writing on Canadian feminist entrepreneurship (Orser et al., 2012), many studies use feminist perspectives but often still focus on the individual women entrepreneur within her social setting, empowerment, and possible positive impacts.

If the intention is to embrace and unite multiple feminisms towards in a common goal, we need to give more attention to how these feminisms are included and honoured in the literature. At present, we struggle to locate feminist entrepreneurship literature engaging with diverse and multiple feminisms. There is potential within this collective vision to create new spaces for thinking and action, but this requires "dialogue between and among feminist ideologies and collective praxis despite the tensions, contradictions and debates among feminist scholars" (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019, p. 1213). These divisions can make collective forms of feminism and allyship difficult in practice (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). The intention here is not to essentialize difference or create a dichotomy between neoliberal feminism and other feminisms, or between Western and other feminisms (Alkhaled, 2021), but rather to think further about the potential for collective feminist entrepreneurship. Ozkazanc-Pan's (2019) sketch of a collectivist feminism definition that may be of use here as it engages with intersectional, decolonial, postcolonial, and transnational feminist perspectives:

Derived from non-western feminism's shared focus on racialized historical context, structural arrangements and critical epistemologies, I conceptualize collectivist feminism as a communal epistemological safe space and praxis arriving out of a historical moment, a positive disjuncture, whereby agency materializes through shared histories and acts that make visible the unseen [...]. Collective feminism is recognition that gender system change will require collective efforts, voices and scholarship that undoubtedly cross national, virtual and community boundaries when wide-ranging, transversal communal action is required. While individual strategies, such as strategic femininity, may be necessary, they will not be sufficient for systemic change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019, p. 1217).

Our review also finds room to improve inclusivity and intersectionality in enterprise support organizations, financial institutions, governments, and research. We locate additional gaps in knowledge about supporting women and diverse entrepreneurs who have been incarcerated, experience mental health challenges, live with a disability, and/or are facing other additional barriers. In the future, more consideration may be given to alternative or cooperative models that similarly represent feminist values without the attached terminology (Phipps, 2021). For example, Phipps (2021) research on Black women entrepreneurs' cooperative and feminist businesses highlights that there are opportunities for inclusive, collaborative, ethical, and caring approaches that are intentional about dialogue.



Conclusion

This literature review provides an overview of feminist entrepreneurship in theory and practice and situates feminist entrepreneurship in the Canadian ecosystem. We find that feminist entrepreneurship in Canada is at a crossroads. Feminist entrepreneurship, and notably women and diverse entrepreneurs' practices are commonly represented by an individual, popular, and sometimes neoliberal feminist perspective. This is reflected in policy and institutional environments, and throughout the entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, there are several entrepreneurs, activists, and thought leaders with feminist values and practices in their businesses. We also find that not everyone identifies with or uses the term feminist entrepreneurship. Women's entrepreneurship, women's self-employment, and other terms are more commonly utilized but do not necessarily capture the same ideas and ideals. Future research might look more into the tensions with the concept of feminist entrepreneurship, and how inclusivity might be strengthened.



Glossary

Feminine: having qualities that are usually attributed to women

Feminism: the belief and movement that aims for equal rights, respect, and freedom for everyone and works to end sexism and oppression

Gender lens: a point of view that takes differences between men and women into account, but not necessarily a feminist place of action.

Intersectionality: describes the dynamics and intersection of systems of inequality based on gender, ethnicity, identity, race, disability, class and other forms of discrimination (Centre for Intersectional Justice, 2023). The term is from the influential works of Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Lean entrepreneurship approach: an approach to creating and managing startups and new product development, with the goal of getting a desired product to customers' hands faster, with less waste and maximum acceleration (Reis, n.d.).

Neoliberalism: an idea and philosophy that emphasizes free-market capitalism (deregulation) and the privatization of government and public services. From the 1970s-1990s, several neoliberal economic policies were implemented that increased inequality and had harmful socioeconomic and environmental consequences.

Patriarchy: the male-centred system of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in society, the economy, and policy. In this system, men occupy positions of power, privilege, and dominance (Nash, 2009, 2020)



Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Methods

This literature review aims to understand the context of feminist entrepreneurship in Canada. We seek to understand the deep meanings of feminist entrepreneurship in theory and practice, its impacts, and its place in the socio-economic landscape. From September - December 2023, the research team conducted a review of academic and grey literature on feminist entrepreneurship in Canada from approximately 2000 - present. Grey literature is included in our review for four reasons:

- There are gaps in academic scholarship, and many sources are dated.
- Grey literature is often written and produced by experts in the field, (Pappas & Williams, 2011) as demonstrated in our review.
- Grey literature may be a more practical and relevant source for entrepreneurs and those not in academia.
- Including grey literature can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the narratives, experiences, and realities of feminist entrepreneurship (Adams et al., 2017; Pappas & Williams, 2011)
- People from diverse backgrounds may not have adequate access to research funding and academic (or sponsored) publishing opportunities.

We searched for literature through Google Scholar and customized Google searches, targeted websites of organizations, and engaged in processes of consultation with content experts. Originally, we searched for literature using the key words “feminist entrepreneurship.” However, we soon found that we needed to expand our criteria to include “women’s entrepreneurship,” “women’s self-employment,” “gender + entrepreneurship,” and “intersectional + entrepreneurship.”

The research team reviewed 150+ sources from academic journal articles, policy briefs, organizational reports, news articles, podcasts, and websites. Sources were primarily Canadian, but we include some international sources. The data was analyzed through a critical approach, seeking to synthesize and understand the themes within the data (Depraetere et al., 2021; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).



Appendix 2: Feminism in Government and Policy

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some provincial governments were more progressive than the federal government in championing women's economic development. For example, former Ontario Premier Bob Rae funded women's economic development and self-employment, creating opportunities for community organizations to work with women on social assistance, and for women to start businesses. At the federal level, there were also well-funded regional women's economic development clusters with Community Futures that had funding for rural and remote communities. However, some women at the time were unable to access services from these organizations because they weren't willing to fund women's ideas.


Between 2006 - 2015, the Harper government reoriented the Status of Women Canada, which held the Women Entrepreneurship portfolio. In this reorientation, funding for research and advocacy was eliminated which resulted in many feminist organizations closing or shutting down, undermining intellectual and physical spaces for women and feminists (Stinson, 2015). At this time, the Harper government shifted the funding towards primary businesses groups with a narrower economic focus, to support individual, entrepreneurial, and business-oriented lens, instead of women's organizations that worked to meet women's needs in a collective way (Stinson, 2015). These changes have been repeatedly criticized for their poor practical applications. There are several reports of funding for progressive women's organizations being denied, and an overall negative impact on women's economic benefit in practice (*Standing Committee on the Status of Women*, 2009).

In 2011, the Canadian Taskforce for Women's Business Growth was also assembled to "consult widely with women business owners and other stakeholders to identify barriers and advance recommendations for entrepreneurship policy reform" (Orser, 2017, p. 105). However, no taskforce recommendations were implemented by 2015 mainly due: to an absence of advocacy by women's entrepreneurship organizations; a lack of accountability, oversight, funding, and reporting; conflicting views and policy priorities for women's enterprises; and the ghettoization of gender-focused entrepreneurship policies (Orser, 2017).

In 2017, the new liberal government relocated the Women Entrepreneurship portfolio to Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, and renamed Status of Women Canada to Women and Gender Equality Canada (T. Richard, 2022).

COVID-19 also had a disproportionate impact on diverse women entrepreneurs in Canada (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; Sultana & Ravanera, 2020). 53% of women entrepreneurs faced additional childcare burdens at this time, compared to only 12% of men entrepreneurs (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020, p. 13). Women-led businesses are often in high contact sectors and hardest hit industries, and are more likely to have decreased revenue or discontinue their operations (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022; Sultana & Ravanera, 2020).

88% of entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups (women, racialized people, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, refugees, and LGBTQ2s+ people) have lost contracts, customers or clients during the pandemic. In comparison, only 34% of all small businesses reported loss of contracts (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020, p. 13).



During the pandemic, 44.4% of native-born entrepreneurs had access to a subsidy, financing, or a tax credit, while only 25.3% of immigrants were able to access these forms of assistance. In terms of economic recovery, immigrant entrepreneurs have a greater need for support measures, particularly those providing tax relief (80.8% of immigrant entrepreneurs vs. 69.5% of native-born entrepreneurs need these supports) (Cisneros et al., 2021, p. v).

The Feminist Economic Recovery Plan (Kaplan, 2020) was a critical step towards including the term “feminist” in economic and entrepreneurial policy. However, Orser (2022) finds that Canada’s feminist policies do not define “feminism” clearly, have ambiguous investment criteria, and fail to consult with and use language inclusive of gender-diverse people. Similarly, government efforts to support women’s economic development during this time such as the 2021 “Task Force on Women in the Economy” still neglect the perspectives of women entrepreneurs in planning and recovery processes (Mutch, 2021). In an interview, Barbara Orser shared that ad hoc measures for underrepresented groups are not a long-term solution, and that the feminist recovery plan requires expanding understanding of entrepreneurship to be a means of social change (Cunha, 2021).

The newly released 2023 Women’s Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) is investing nearly \$7 billion in investments and commitments to diverse women entrepreneurs. The goal of WES is to “increase women-owned businesses’ access to the financing, networks and expertise they need to start up, scale up and access new markets” through WES Inclusive Women Venture Capital Initiative, Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund, WES Ecosystem Fund, and educational support through the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2023a, b, c). Although the WES strategy takes a “whole of government” approach (Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, 2023a), factors such as childcare policies have an impact on women entrepreneurs (Cukier, Mo, et al., 2022).

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