

Feminist Entrepreneurship at a Crossroads

Executive Summary

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Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are vital to Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem, and supporting them improves social, economic, and environmental outcomes. However, women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs face several barriers due to social and gender inequalities and stereotypes that impact access to appropriate financing, resources, networks, and support. Feminist entrepreneurs challenge these systemic barriers and use their businesses to create economic and social change.

In 2023, Sustainable Livelihoods Canada and the Canadian Women's Foundation partnered with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute to conduct a literature review that brings together knowledge, writing, and practices on feminist entrepreneurship within Canada and across other countries, and in feminist versus mainstream arenas. The idea of feminist entrepreneurship is complex and influenced by history, economy, and society. Although this summary highlights the main points from the literature review, it cannot provide the same depth as [Feminist Entrepreneurship at a Crossroads](#). This work is funded by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada as part of the Women's Entrepreneurship Strategy.

Highlights

Deconstructing Feminism and Entrepreneurship in Canada

Feminist entrepreneurship is difficult to define due to the many meanings of 'feminism' and 'entrepreneurship' across history, locations, and political, social, and economic contexts. The literature also reveals that these concepts can sometimes be at odds with each other.

Critically, the type of feminism in 'feminist entrepreneurship' matters. The review uses an intersectional feminist approach aligned with the Canadian Women's Foundation mission, and uses a definition of intersectional feminism that:

- Aims "to understand the many ways different women are affected by barriers and discrimination that go beyond their gender" (CWF, 2023)

- 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)



Mainstream entrepreneurship (often referred to as ‘traditional’ or ‘dominant’ entrepreneurship) has been defined from a male-centered and patriarchal point of view that reinforces gender inequality. Mainstream entrepreneurship is patriarchal, competitive, and individualistic (Table 1). Neoliberalism (a philosophy that promotes privatization and free-market capitalism) had a major impact on feminism and entrepreneurship and continues to have influence today. Neoliberal feminism supports individual gain and competition and is most accepted in society because it does not challenge existing systems (Harquail, 2019a; Porém et al., 2023; Rottenberg, 2019).

Feminist Entrepreneurship

Feminist entrepreneurship is collective, inclusive, and transformative (Harquail, 2019b), and does not follow mainstream entrepreneurship values and practices (Table 1). Feminist entrepreneurship goes beyond women’s entrepreneurship and self-employment and applies a feminist lens to entrepreneurial and business theories and everyday practices. Feminist entrepreneurs (and self-employed people) are motivated by social and gender inequalities and feminist values. They are action and change-oriented, and work to create wealth and social change based on feminist values, social justice, and anti-oppression orientations and commitments (see extensive work by Harquail, Mutch, Orser & Elliott). Feminist entrepreneurs embed a feminist mindset, values, and practices in all aspects of businesses.

Table 1: 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 Canada, feminist entrepreneurship is already practiced by women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, sometimes unknowingly. Some entrepreneurial practices and sources that are not self-defined as 'feminist entrepreneurship' still embody feminist values and qualities. There is currently a lack of diversity in the sources on feminist entrepreneurship, but this may indicate that knowledge and resources are shared in less conventional ways (such as through conferences, networking events, stories, etc.) The idea of mainstream entrepreneurship may also not be relevant to all women and gender-diverse people running their own businesses. In some cases, self-employment may be a more relevant term.

Feminism in Canada's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

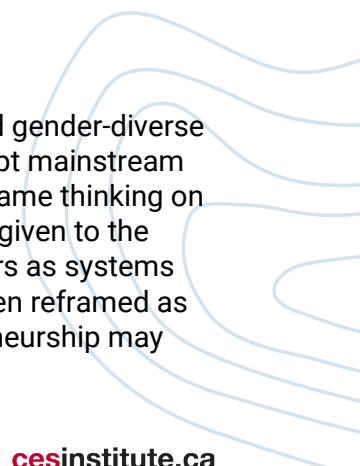
The Canadian entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a friendly space for feminist entrepreneurship practices due to societal values, and exclusive (non-feminist) practices by many ecosystem players such as governments, financial institutions, and enterprise support organizations. Women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are presented from a deficit perspective and are often 'othered.' Due to society's ideas about 'entrepreneurial success,' women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs are continuously negotiating their entrepreneurial identities in different contexts. A lot of feminism in public and online spaces, education, public policy, financial institutions, and support organizations is 'washed' or watered down:



- **Research:** focuses on the experiences, motivations, and values of women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs. Studies do not often use feminist or intersectional approaches.
- **Government / policy:** support for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs is individualistic, rooted in neoliberalism, and leave women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs out of discussions and decision-making processes.
- **Financial institutions:** have deeply embedded barriers for women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs, which are compounded for under-represented entrepreneurs. Including a lack of awareness, visibility, and access to information about funding and financing opportunities, accelerator and incubator solutions that are disconnected from reality and social contexts, and a lack of appropriate support.
- **Education / support organizations:** many do not offer tools or services rooted in feminist principles.

Some alternative financing institutions and organizations have emerged to validate women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs' experiences and practices, but they frequently do not receive government or corporate support.

International Perspectives

Around the world, mainstream definitions of entrepreneurship shape women and gender-diverse entrepreneur's realities, and these entrepreneurs sometimes internalize and adopt mainstream perspectives. However, some international perspectives can strengthen and reframe thinking on feminist entrepreneurship. These sources highlight that 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. For example, entrepreneurship has been reframed as an empowering and subversive activity for women in the Global South. Entrepreneurship may





also 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.

Paths Forward

The literature review finds that there are some potential challenges with the concept and roots of feminist entrepreneurship. This may reinforce dominant and oppressive economic systems without reflecting further. Some paths forward may include:

- Expand the relevance and inclusivity of feminist entrepreneurship as a concept to women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs
- Clarify the collective value of feminist entrepreneurship, as sources do not yet fully engage with diverse feminisms
- Build on international perspectives about transformation in feminist entrepreneurship and move away from individualistic ways of thinking
- Consider alternative or cooperative models and practices that are not labelled as 'feminist' but similarly represent feminist values and approaches that are inclusive, collaborative, and caring
- Strengthen inclusivity and intersectionality in Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as in enterprise support organizations, financial institutions, governments, and research
- More research supporting women and diverse entrepreneurs who have been incarcerated, experience mental health challenges, live with a disability, and/or are facing other additional barriers.

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