

Presented By:  
**The Welland Heritage Council  
and Multicultural Centre**



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Status of Women  
Canada

Condition féminine  
Canada

Improving Prosperity for Niagara's  
Women Business Owners  
Final Report

# About the Welland Heritage Council and Multicultural Centre

The Welland Heritage Council and Multicultural Centre has been providing services to our community since 1976. Our mission is to provide newcomers and Canadian Citizens with services and programs that strengthen individuals, families and the community, while creating a cultural awareness and understanding among all citizens. We assist all individuals to function with independence and dignity in society.

In addition to the “Improving Prosperity for Niagara’s Women Business Owners” project, our current programs consist of Settlement Services for newcomers to Canada; an emergency shelter for newcomers to Canada; English as a Second Language Classes; Employment Solutions, a full service Employment Agency for everyone in the community; and a Women's Entrepreneur Development Program.

We provide annual events that bring the community together such as the Multicultural Festival, the Welland Dragon Boat Festival, and the World Ball.

Please visit our website for more information about our services and community events at [www.wellandheritagecouncil.com](http://www.wellandheritagecouncil.com) or Facebook @welland.heritagecouncil or Twitter @WHC\_Welland.



**Welland Heritage Council  
and Multicultural Centre**

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# Project Overview

Small business has been proposed as the way forward for our region to address Niagara's high unemployment rate as reported by Statistics Canada. Our project aimed to increase the economic prosperity of women business owners in Niagara through implementing solutions to identified barriers.

Our organization has years of experience working with immigrant and low income women in our community, and more recently with new women business owners, together with community partners who are also working to improve the economic prosperity of women and their families. The project permitted us to bring influential stakeholders together to assess what is already in place to address this need for increased economic prosperity for women business owners, as well as assess current barriers. Identified barriers were met with solutions to provide increased access to resources and opportunities for women business owners and ensure a level playing field for both genders to succeed in small business. The resulting increased opportunities for economic prosperity will have a sustaining impact for women business owners and emerging generations of women in Niagara creating change at the systemic level.

The project consisted of 4 phases over a 3 year period, finishing March 31, 2018.

The first phase consisted of **building partnerships** to connect with community stakeholders and women business owners to contribute their expertise and resources to the project.

The second phase consisted of the **assessment and identification of barriers**. Monthly meetings with all stakeholders, women business owners, and project consultants took place in major cities across Niagara Region. A gender-based assessment of current available resources, opportunities, and identified barriers for women business owners in Niagara was prepared using the input from all participants, so that the project direction was participant-led.

The third phase consisted of the **selection and implementation of proposed solutions**. Monthly meetings were again held with the stakeholders, women business owners, and project consultants to propose solutions to address the barriers women business owners in Niagara face that were identified in previous meetings.

As a result three committees were formed to assist with the implementation of the proposed solutions according to the passions of the stakeholders and women business owners. These solutions were to result in new economic opportunities for women business owners in Niagara because of the relevance of the stakeholders at the table and their level of community engagement, and contribute to equal opportunities for women business owners to access the resources and opportunities that men business owners do.

The fourth and final phase of the project consisted of the **ongoing assessment of solution implementation and project results dissemination**. Quarterly meetings with stakeholders, women business owners and project consultants took place to assess the progress of each solution being implemented and make any needed changes.

As the project results are released it is hoped that stakeholders from the various sectors in Niagara Region will begin thinking more about how they can better accommodate equal opportunities for women business owners. Men business owners will learn the value of having successful female business leaders in Niagara and contribute to changing the experience of women business owners in Niagara.

We anticipate that other organizations will continue to be supportive of this project and assist with the continued implementation of the solutions in any way they can as we disseminate the results of the project, since our region is supportive of initiatives to help women and families to prosper.



# Research

Gender-Based Entrepreneurship Analysis  
Metasynthesis Report  
October 2017

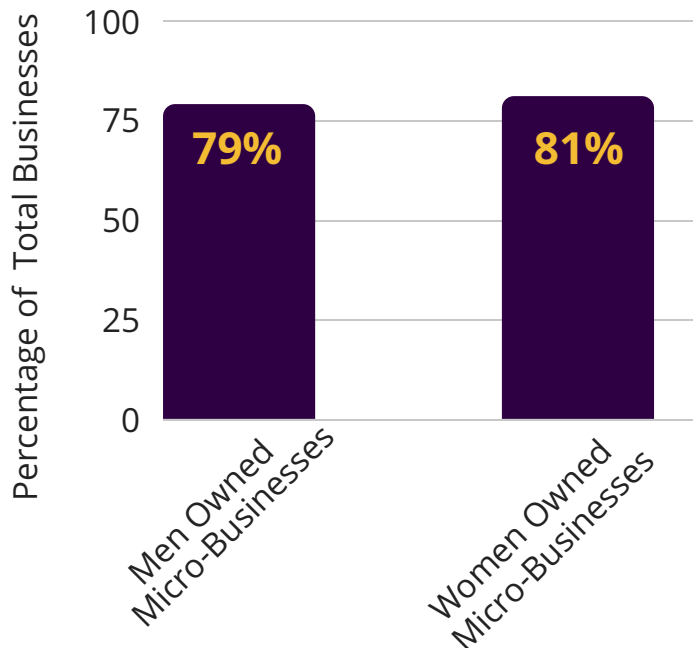


# Key Points

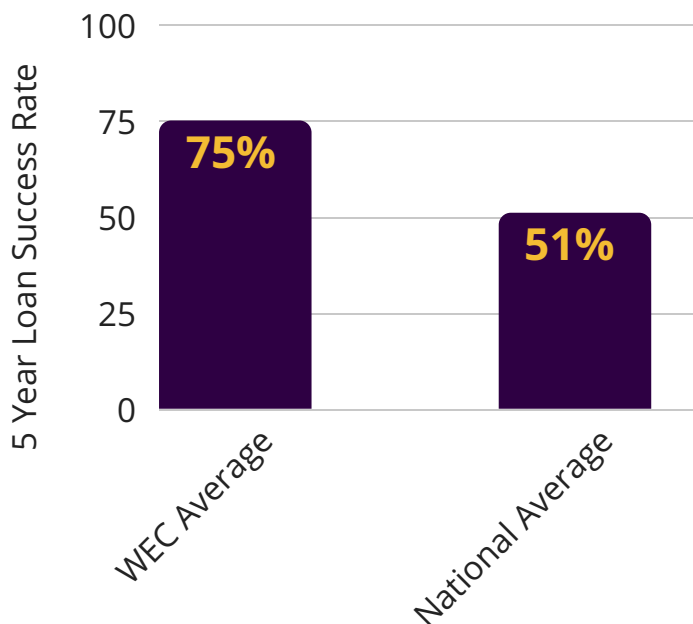
Despite being almost equally represented in the micro-business sector, men owned businesses generate double the revenue. Research indicates that this is due to differences in financial risk-taking and networking tendencies.



By offering loan care - personalized support through a qualified business adviser and various applied learning tools - British Columbia's Women's Enterprise Centre has a 5 year loan success rate that is 50% greater than the national average.



Only 1 in 5 business owners and aspiring owners access entrepreneurship support services.



## Methodology

Focus groups and an online survey were used to gather knowledge about the business demographics and challenges specific to women business owners in the Niagara Region. A literature review was then conducted to understand the barriers through an academic lens.

This research is structured as a meta-synthesis and is intended to inform practical and tangible change in the Niagara Region for women business owners. While every effort was made to select literature conducted under a gender neutral perspective of entrepreneurial norms (as opposed to research using gender-biased measuring instruments), this project is not structured nor is it intended to challenge or support any overarching gender or social construct theories or add to any academic body of knowledge.

## Knowledge Gathering

Gender-based research on entrepreneurship is conducted almost exclusively under the umbrella assumption that women face barriers that men do not when starting a business. Beyond this focal point however, research into women's entrepreneurship branches down countless avenues, and results are highly varied based on almost infinite factors including but not limited to research location, population demographics, theoretical frameworks, business sectors, business development stages, and the degree to which these topics intersect. To ensure that the literature reviewed for this project covered relevant issues for women in the Niagara Region, focus groups were conducted with women from numerous sectors and business development stages in the Niagara Region, and used to inform the direction of the literature review that follows. A small scale survey (n=22, not intended to be representative) was used to gather additional information to further inform the research direction.

Over 150 women business owners and 22 community stakeholders attended the focus groups held at various locations throughout the Niagara Region. Women were asked open-ended questions including "What are the top 3 barriers you have faced as a woman entrepreneur?" and "What gaps in resources, tools, and information have you experienced?" The focus groups were also given discussion topics and asked to elaborate on their experiences including those within the community, in accessing education, in accessing finances, networking, utilizing technology, and balancing work with other priorities (including family). Women were also asked to describe what made them feel "successful" as business owners, and listed resources and services that they wished had been or would become available to them to support their businesses.

Many of the challenges identified by women in the focus groups were not gendered, instead describing general challenges associated with business start-up. Furthermore, many women "wished" for services that were already in existence, often times in abundance, at little or no cost. The focus groups indicated three broad categories that presented challenges for women business owners in the Niagara Region: missing resources, barriers in accessing existing resources, and lack of engagement in existing and accessible resources. Women indicated adequate mentors, supports specifically tailored for women, and business training programs that were specific and relevant to their businesses, as resources missing from the Niagara Region. Women faced barriers accessing financial capital, accessing childcare, and achieving recognition as a legitimate business and not a "hobby" business, especially when their business was home-based.



Furthermore, home-based businesses were excluded from qualifying for financing opportunities. Women stated that they often didn't meet the criteria for accessing program funds. Some women also expressed discomfort with attending current networking groups that were often male-dominated. Most informative for the literature review were the focus group findings that indicated a lack of engagement in currently available and accessible resources. Many women stated that they were unaware of what business support organizations or funding options were "out there", or stated that resources weren't adequately advertised and too expensive (even though most are available at little or no cost). The women said that they did not see the value in existing networking groups. Some women stated that they needed additional training on how to manage finances, market their business, conduct market research, write a business plan, write grant applications, and optimize their social networking skills. Most of these resources currently exist in the Niagara Region and in abundance online. Therefore, the literature review needed to focus on why women are not accessing the resources that they need and that are available to them, so that tangible solutions to increase engagement or modify service development to equitably benefit women could be implemented.

### Literature Review

#### *London Small Business Centre Entrepreneurial Climate Study*

A study conducted by the London Small Business Centre in 2014 entitled Small Business Centre Entrepreneurial Climate Study compiled statistical information about small businesses in London, Ontario, and compared the results demographically by age and gender, and also by stages of business ownership (intender, current owner, past owner, and non-intender). Survey respondents were asked to identify barriers that fell under financial, logistical, and social umbrellas. While numerous barriers were identified, there was no statistically significant difference in which barriers were the most identified by men and women (London Small Business Centre, 2014). The greatest barrier identified by men and women who currently own, intend to own, or have previously owned a business, was insufficient financial resources. Lack of a solid business plan and fear of failure also ranked high, although to a much lesser extent than insufficient financial resources. In contrast to results from the Niagara Region focus groups, less than 2% of London total survey participants identified "lack of mentoring/ good strategic advice and support" as a barrier.

Of those that already owned small businesses in London, 11% felt that the community was not adequately meeting their needs as small business owners (SBOs). Of those intending to start a business, 15% felt the same way. Interestingly, less than 50% of owners, intenders, or past owners were aware of the small business support services available in their community, and of those that were aware of services, only 60% accessed them. A total of one in every five current business owners or intenders had accessed support services. Moreover, many respondents did not know that business support centres offered assistance with market research or accessing funding. One question not addressed by this study is whether a higher percentage of men or women business owners access support services.

Underemployment, unemployment, a desire to balance work with personal life, and a desire to pursue a field that aligned with their skills and interests were all significantly greater motivations for women to start their own businesses than for men. Although not presented as a gendered finding, the study also found that social enterprise was the least familiar business model among respondents, which is interesting when considering the general rhetoric in the literature that women are more likely to engage in a social enterprise





as a business model.

### *Gender and entrepreneurship*

There is a misconception that lifestyle or micro-businesses (having less than 5 employees) are owned mainly by women and high growth start-ups are owned mainly by men. According to the British Columbia based Women's Enterprise Centre (2014), 81% of woman-owned businesses and 79% of man-owned businesses are micro-businesses. Interestingly, the same study found that on average, women-owned businesses only generate half of the revenue of men-owned businesses, although net profits are 89% that of men-owned businesses (Women's Enterprise Centre, 2014). In Canada and the United States, most of the businesses that are established and funded with the support of women business centres (which in the USA can be used by men and women) and microloan programs, are "lifestyle" businesses and generally generate a lower income than if the owner worked for someone else (Braidford, P., Stone, I., Tesfaye, B., 2013).

There is a growing body of research challenging the notion that women and men can be separated into two exclusive groups with different characteristics and facing different barriers as business owners. Gupta, Sidkar, Turban, and Wasti (2009) argue that it is not an individual's sex that makes them more or less likely to succeed as an entrepreneur, but rather their personal identification with traits that have been socially coined as "masculine". A study of entrepreneurs in North America and Europe found that on entrepreneurial self-efficacy tests, women and men that self-identified with stereotypically masculine traits were more likely to believe in their own ability as entrepreneurs (Braidford et al. 2013). Among individuals that identified with more stereotypically feminine traits, entrepreneurial intentions were lower (Braidford et al. 2013).

Irrespective of gender or the stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, there are several traits that have been positively associated with entrepreneurship. Some of these entrepreneurship-positive traits include: overall high personal confidence and low fear of failure, higher willingness to take risks, more management know how and know who, strong communication skills, strong team building skills, the ability to build and leverage relationships, and the ability to recognize opportunity (McGowan, P., Cooper, S., Durkin, M., O'Kane, C., 2015). A study of women in high-growth start-ups also found that the ability to recognize opportunities that others miss was paramount to success as an entrepreneur. Of the women studied, the consistent finding was an opinion that to be successful as an entrepreneur, the entrepreneur needs to believe in their own abilities to move from an idea to a venture. They reported that a belief in one's own abilities increases their ability to recognize and act on opportunities (McGowan, P., Cooper, S., Durkin, M., O'Kane, C., 2015).

Fenwick and Hutton (2000) studied how women defined success as business owners and found that for many women, success meant balancing their home lives with their work lives. This flexibility was an especially important motivator for women with young children (Conroy, T., Weiler, S., 2015). Excessive money and material items were not a priority for women, and although they desired financial stability their overall quality of life, reputation, and social/community value were more important than wealth (Conroy, T., Weiler, S., 2015). BC women surveyed also placed more priority on work-life balance and less priority on disposable income as



motivators for starting a business (Women's Enterprise Centre, 2014).

### *Gender and risk taking*

Risk taking has been discussed in length in the literature as being positively correlated with entrepreneurial success. Women do not take as great of financial risks, as reported by the Women's Enterprise Centre (2014). According to the Women's Enterprise Centre, 57% of women surveyed that wanted to eventually grow their business were not comfortable carrying debt, and in the past men have been reported as borrowing, on average, up to 141% more than women business owners (Women's Enterprise Centre, 2014). Forlani (2013) found that women are less likely to make risky financial decisions as they pertain to business development because they believe less in their abilities to make these decisions. Interestingly, although their risk taking self-efficacy was significantly lower, their performance in a risk simulating task was not different from men performing the same task. The study found that the prospect of profits drives risk, but only if the individual believes in their own abilities to mitigate the potential negative outcomes. Women were less likely to under-rate their risk taking self-efficacy when they had other people to "calibrate" themselves against (Forlani, D. 2013).

### *Gender, sector, and financing*

A consistent finding among the literature is that women owned ventures tend to be concentrated in a few small-growth sectors. London Small Business Centre (2014) found that women are significantly more likely to be in health care or social assistance than men. Mijid (2015), found that in the United States, women primarily own businesses in the service or retail industry, which are smaller starts and therefore less likely to qualify for a loan. A study conducted in the United Kingdom on women entrepreneurs pursuing business growth found that 78% of women's businesses were clustered in the service sector (Mitchelmore, S., Rowley, J., 2013). The 2016 Canadian Key Business Statistics Report found that small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that were majority owned by women were clustered in information, administration, health care, recreation, and service industries (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada Small Business Branch, 2016). The Women's Enterprise Centre (2014) found that although women hold high-level positions within knowledge-based industries in Canada, only 6% of women own businesses in the knowledge-based sector, and less than 10% of women owned firms export, falling below the national average. The Majority Female-Owned Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Special Edition: Key Small Business Statistics report, completed by Industry Canada (2015) reported that the service oriented sectors are considered highly competitive and to yield lower monetary returns, making them riskier businesses in the eyes of financial institutions.

### *Missing resources*

In British Columbia the Women's Enterprise Centre conducted a study into the specific business patterns used and barriers faced by women in BC and Canada. Women identified resources that they felt were the most "needed" to support them in running their business. Of the supports listed, those that could be classified as "missing resources" included: business advising services, mentoring, financial management training, marketing training, market research data specific to their industry, management training, and leadership training (Women's Enterprise Centre, 2014). Consistent with our findings in the Niagara Region, the majority of these



resources already existed. The Women's Enterprise Centre also highlighted the need for training for women on "appropriate" risk taking behaviours. A report by the US Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship found that relevant business training and counselling was a missing resource that still presented a barrier for women in the United States (Cantwell, M., 2014). Braidford, Stone, and Tesfaye (2013) reported that business centres specific for women tend not to be equipped for women at growth stages or for women in stereotypically male fields. This was consistent with a finding from Women's Enterprise Centre (2014) in BC, that the training currently available for start-up doesn't include training for women when they are ready to grow, and that later becomes a challenge.

A lack of business mentorship for women has been repeatedly reported as a missing resource. Although mentorship services do exist to some extent, reports indicate that the existing mentor relationships available are not appropriate for women's needs (McGowan, P., Cooper, S., Durkin, M., O'Kane, C., 2015). Many women prefer the idea of a woman-to-woman mentoring relationship because they feel that other women better understand the way in which their personal and professional lives intersect (Braidford, P., Stone, I., Tesfaye, B., 2013). Gender-specific mentoring has been purported by Knopik and Moerer (2014) as a way to provide new professional business women with positive role models that can support them socially, and in overcoming discrimination that they may face in their career. The Women's Enterprise Centre (2014) found that women need experience-based training that is strategic and specific and accounts for their unique schedules.

#### *Access to resources*

The main resource that women face barriers in accessing is financial capital (Women's Enterprise Centre, 2014). A US senate committee report from 2014 reported that only 4.4% of the total dollar value of small business loans and only 7% of the total dollar value of venture funds go to women-owned businesses (Cantwell, M., 2014). The Women's Enterprise Centre (2014) reports that only 7% of venture capital goes to women in Canada as well. A Government of Canada report stated that of business owners that applied, 66.6% of women were rejected for financing due to insufficient collateral, compared to 35.7% of men. The report further stated that 65.7% of women were rejected due to operating in an (institution-judged) unstable industry, compared to 24.8% of men rejected for the same reason (Industry Canada., 2015). It has been suggested that the small business ideas that women present are viewed as less valuable to the economy, and therefore less worthy of support. One notable exception was that women's businesses tend to receive more crowdfunding than men-owned businesses in the United States (Braidford, P., Stone, I., Tesfaye, B., 2013). Women's Enterprise Centre (2014) reported that in addition to insufficient security and credit history, women experienced lower approval rates for short term credit, and higher documentation requirements as compared to their male counterparts.

Additional barriers have been identified for both women business owners and micro-business owners in accessing financing and accessing the support services offered by small business centres. In a 2017 report on North America and Europe, women business owners reported that after engaging with business support centres in the US, they didn't pursue any further support because they felt patronized by advisors. The same report stated that women's business ideas were generally perceived as less valuable than men's and therefore less worthy of support, and quoted Swedish case studies in which women reported feeling that they weren't



taken seriously by financial institutions and support agencies (Braidford, P., Stone, I., Tesfaye, B. 2013).

There are many barriers in accessing resources that are not necessarily gendered, but are instead dependent on the type of business and the characteristics of the business owners. Micro-businesses disproportionately face these challenges. According to Houston and Reuschke (2017) there are several challenges unique to micro-businesses that can inhibit their growth potential. These challenges include suffering disproportionately from credit rationing, numerous legal steps and financial challenges that must be taken to transition out of micro-status including registering the business, hiring employees, exporting, and moving to larger premises. There are other “unspoken” barriers that inhibit the growth of micro-businesses, which are based in the general perception of micro-businesses as lifestyle or hobby businesses that only create “jobless growth”. This study was conducted in the UK whereas of 2013, 95.6% of all businesses employed less than 10 people (Houston, D., Reuschke, D., 2017). In the United States, women’s business centres also service men if they request support, making up to 18% of their clientele which suggests that it may be more prudent to offer services divided by demographics other than gender (Braidford, P., Stone, I., Tesfaye, B. 2013).

### *Engagement in resources*

Fenwick and Hutton (2000) found less than 10% of women business owners had any formal business training, and most didn’t consider taking any additional training once they had started their business, even though they were aware that they had a lot to learn. Women reported doing their own research to learn more about running their businesses, but found training courses being offered were too general or basic to be of use (Fenwick, T., Hutton, S., 2000). Some research suggests that women’s lack of engagement in the currently available resources is dependent on their confidence as business owners. The Women’s Enterprise Centre (2014) found that women report suffering from “imposter syndrome” far more than men do, which is characterized by uncertainty as to whether or not they are qualified to be in the position that they are in. Women in this study reported needing management and leadership training to support them in running their business (Women’s Enterprise Centre, 2014). Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) found that if women believe that they have the necessary competencies for entrepreneurship they are more likely to take advantage of opportunities presented to them. Women have also been found less likely to learn about and use new technologies compared to men, but also feel less computer competent (Mack, E. A., Marie-Pierre, L., Redican, K., 2016).

Women also underutilize available funding options. It is important to note that in 2014, almost 50% of Canadian small businesses did not request external financing to support their enterprise. Of those that did not request financing, 88.3% stated that it was because they did not need it. Other reasons for not requesting included: the application was too hard or time consuming, the non-applicant thought their request would be denied, the cost of financing was too high, or they were unaware that financing was available (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada Small Business Branch, 2016). Mijid (2015) found that women are more likely to be discouraged borrowers than men, especially if they have been denied in the past. Women are more likely to inhibit the growth of their own careers because they don’t feel that they have the necessary skills to achieve higher positions (Phipps, S. T. A., Prieto, L. C., 2015).



The resource in which women are the most disproportionately engaged is networking. Knopik and Moerer (2014) found that the research rhetoric is that career mobility is most influenced by social capital. This finding was echoed by Neill, Metcalf, and York (2015), who found that women in high growth start-ups stressed the importance of networking outside of their immediate industry and social circle. Networking is an important factor for leadership development, accessing information and resources, and community sponsorship of credentials, yet most women underestimate the importance of these relationships and do not recognize them as being equally important to their professional competencies (Knopik, M. S., Moerer, T., 2014). To this end, most women do not have a plan in place prior to going to networking events to remain relevant to the people that they meet beyond handing out business cards (Knopik, M. S., Moerer, T., 2014).

Although women with higher education tend to have larger formal networks (Knopik, M. S., Moerer, T., 2014), women tend to rely primarily on their small, homogenous, informal, and personal networks of friends and family (McGowan, P., Cooper, S., Durkin, M., O’Kane, C., 2015; Sharafizad, J., Coetzer, A., 2016), which results in less knowledge spillover between industries (Conroy, T., Weiler, S., 2015). In the growth stages of their business, women tend to network mainly with other women resulting in fewer men in their networks, and lesser access to useful contacts in male-dominated fields including the financial sector (Sharafizad, J., Coetzer, A., 2016). Research suggests that women are less likely than men to leverage their social capital for their own benefit (Phipps, S. T. A., Prieto, L. C., 2015). An interesting finding from a research paper that examined the differences between women in established leadership positions versus women entrepreneurs found that women entrepreneurs do not want to leverage their personal relationships for business purposes. Women in established leadership positions did not share this view, however it was noted that building relationships for one’s own benefit may not be as inherent to women as it is to men (Knopik, M. S., Moerer, T. 2014). Women tend to create more intimate ties with individuals that they consider more important for their business, and often broker the relationships between two otherwise unrelated individuals, but tend to see their own networks as both social and business contacts rather than two separate entities (Sharafizad, J., Coetzer, A., 2016). After their businesses were established, women tended to only attend networking events if they had a specific need to be met. It was suggested that women may be underrepresented in formal networks because they feel uncomfortable or excluded (Sharafizad, J., Coetzer, A., 2016).

## Analysis

It is evident that men and women face many of the same barriers when starting a business and that many of those challenges are due to operating micro-businesses. Men and women in Canada both operate primarily in the micro-business sector (as a percentage of businesses owned by each gender) and yet businesses owned by men experience greater growth and profits while women owned businesses lag behind. Although many women may not strive for the exponential growth of their business and define success by being able to balance their careers with their personal life, we cannot deny that remaining competitive within an industry is key for long term sustainability. Through the focus groups and the literature review it could be argued that for women in Niagara, supports that are two-fold and focus on both business sustainability and lifestyle management would be the most beneficial. Although it initially seemed that offering additional services to fill the gaps in support for women business owners would be the most beneficial way forward, the research indicates that women are not using the supports currently available to them, meaning that providing





additional support that is similar to what already exists will be redundant. Therefore, we must instead address how to change the services currently being offered to women in order to increase engagement.

Services that are relevant to women business owners and are cognizant of their overall goals for their business and their lifestyles appears to be missing in the Niagara Region and in supports for women entrepreneurs in general. Women in our regional focus groups expressed this concern, which was echoed in the London Small Business Centre study. Based on the findings of the literature review, offering business plan writing support that focuses on long term lifestyle goals as well as long term business goals, whether those business goals are growth-oriented or not, might be one way to increase the relevance of business plan writing services for women. Knowing that business enterprise centres offer this service as readily as other types of business planning support could also create a more supportive advising environment for women that have experienced this barrier.

The request for mentorship is overwhelming within our community and within women's entrepreneurship as a field. The research indicates however that programming that is too general is under-accessed by women, which suggests that a mentorship program requires structure to meet the specific needs of the women enrolled. That mentorship has been identified as a preferred way to learn new skills suggests that a structured mentorship program may be an ideal way to provide women with skill development in appropriate risk-taking behaviours and networking practices. The British Columbia Women's Enterprise Centre offers a one-on-one mentorship program in which women can identify other women business owners in the community that they look up to and the Enterprise Centre will attempt to facilitate the mentoring relationship.

Data indicates that men and women are almost equally represented in the microbusiness sector, and to a certain extent both use personal financing for their businesses. The major differences highlighted in the literature between men and women were not in the opportunities they are presented with or services available to them. The major differences that had a direct affect on business success existed in three areas: the sectors in which their businesses operate, their risk-taking tendencies, and their networking tendencies. The sector challenge is difficult to address because small business owners are going to select the sector that best aligns with their overall priorities and goals even if that means entering a highly competitive market with smaller returns. Ensuring that women fully understand the market that they are entering and have adequately analyzed the competition could help them develop more competitive business strategies that would be more attractive to financing institutions.

Risk-taking and networking as barriers are both a fortunate and unfortunate finding. On the positive side, these are changes in practice that women can choose to make, however on the negative side, if women do not recognize their risk-taking and networking practices as barriers to their success, they are unlikely to take the necessary steps to make improvements. This makes the solution two-fold. We must first provide women with a means of self-evaluating their own practices and recognizing areas of weakness, and second provide means for women to improve these practices and leverage social and financial capital to benefit the overall growth and/or long term sustainability of their businesses.



Women in Niagara have expressed the desire for more woman-to-woman networking. The research supports this as a viable support for women, since it indicates that women are more comfortable sharing and learning from other women. The research also indicates a need for industry spill-over to maximize the benefit of networking events and give participants access to social capital that they would not find within their own industry.

A major problem that effectively supersedes other barriers is that in general, people do not know what they do not know. Engagement with resources that are currently available, whether through paid courses, enterprise centres, online courses, webinars, and even networking events is relatively low among women business owners within the Niagara Region. It seems that although women know that they have a lot to learn when starting their businesses, they do not necessarily access the information. The research suggests that women are better able to evaluate their own competencies when they have an example to calibrate against suggesting the need for a tool for self-evaluation to help them better understand their own strengths and weaknesses.

Program delivery changes is a vital aspect of all solution implementation going forward. We know from the focus groups and the literature review that offering general courses to women, or business planning that doesn't align with their goals, is seen as irrelevant and therefore under-accessed. The BC Women's Enterprise Centre offers "loan care" to their clients after providing a loan, and they have a five year success rate of 75%, 50% higher than the national average. This lends further support to the possibility of a one-on-one service that incorporates initial business planning, long term business planning, financial planning, and lifestyle management through the enterprise centres, using referrals to general courses only where necessary and relevant. Enterprise centres also need to become more aware of online resources and webinars to refer their clients to, as these tend to be more specific and self-paced.

## **Proposed Modifications to Entrepreneurial Support Services in the Niagara Region**

### *Women-specific programming initiative*

Currently, no Niagara-based enterprise centres offer programming that is targeted to or specifically designed for women entrepreneurs. Having no one that manages the unique challenges that women business owners face, or monitors the changing support needs for women entrepreneurs is a barrier. Furthermore, organizations offering entrepreneurial support need to be made uniformly aware of the barriers that women face and what improvements are needed. Although through the Improving Prosperity for Niagara's Women Business Owners project we are able to conduct the necessary research and initiate programming for solution implementation, a succession team is needed to influence long term change. The Welland Heritage Council and Multicultural Centre offers the "Women's Entrepreneurship Development Program" which teaches women the start-up process and coaches them through the initial stages of starting a business. While this is a strong resource for aspiring entrepreneurs, a larger joint effort among all entrepreneurship services providers is needed to ensure that women are supported at every stage of business ownership and that the needs of women business owners are being monitored and adjusted for on an ongoing basis.



### *Targeted marketing*

Business support services, whether they are offered through enterprise centres, non-profits, chambers of commerce, or private groups are failing to reach their target clients. This is evident by the lack of engagement in and awareness of available services from those looking to start a business. Unless a prospective business owner knows specifically what services they are looking for, assumes that it “must be available somewhere”, and decides to search online for services (which is not necessarily inherent to all business owners), it is unlikely that they will even know that there is help available, and if they do, it is unlikely that they will be exposed to the full range of services. At this point, further research is needed to better reach women business owners in the Niagara Region, especially those that operate micro and home-based businesses that are in the initial stages of their businesses and poised to benefit the most from business support services.

### *Success circles*

Success Circles are a facilitated peer mentoring and networking group in which women from various sectors and stages of business development come together to discuss challenges that they are facing in running their business with the group and receive constructive feedback. In a Success Circle, the group will brainstorm possible solutions to the challenge that the business owner is facing and an action plan can be developed for the business owner to undertake in the month before the next Success Circle. All action plans need to be followed up on at the next meeting to discuss effectiveness and make modifications if necessary. The group will meet the need for women-to-women networking and peer mentoring. To some extent Success Circles can also support industry spill-over by welcoming women from all industries.

### *Mentorship program*

A mentorship program for women is needed. The program should compile a list of volunteer mentors that are willing to have once a month hour long meetings with their mentees for at least 6 months. Women have stressed the importance of having a mentor that provides relevant business counselling and focuses on professional challenges rather than personal ones (except where they intersect). To achieve this, prior to becoming a mentor volunteers should fill out a questionnaire that describes their business, the business model that they follow, their number of employees, and their years in business. A section for women to indicate their past experience with topics such as: accessing childcare, accessing external finances, and importing/exporting is also needed. Mentors will also rate their efficacy in various entrepreneurship-positive areas such as: financial risk taking, networking, marketing, using technology, recognizing opportunity, and leveraging social capital. Mentees will fill out the same questionnaire, as well as set goals for what they would like to achieve in their mentorship relationship. This information will be used to pair up mentors and mentees based on relevance, and the pre-set goals will be used to direct the sessions.





### *Business plan writing service*

Entrepreneurial support organizations need to offer business plan writing services based on a more diverse range of business models. Additionally a service is needed that incorporates business management planning with business plan writing. This service should specifically address the challenges that micro-businesses face disproportionately. Although this service does not need to be specific to women, it should be cognizant of the challenges that women face and therefore more relevant to their long term goals. In addition to a formal business plan, micro-businesses in which all of the responsibilities fall to a few, or often just one person need a more well-rounded plan that determines specific steps that the business owner needs to take in running their business, and most importantly addresses time management. This service needs to be tailored for each individual client in order to maximize that client's prosperity. In addition to a formal business plan that can be used to apply for bank loans, a business management plan might include having the business owner determine things like: where their workspace will be, how they will balance their family responsibilities, which specific loans or grants they will apply for, and how much time per week they will spend on marketing. Most importantly, the plans need to help micro-business owners, especially women, evaluate the risks that they need to take to achieve their business goals, and to learn to manage risk rather than avoid it. Many women need assistance to feel comfortable carrying debt, so developing a plan that helps women find, secure, and manage debt financing is vital. The plans should have specific timelines and goals. For example, rather than "Facebook will be used to market" the business management plan should state "for the first 3 months, posts about the services my business offers will be posted every Thursday to Facebook". The business management plan should also incorporate networking events, helping the business owner determine which events will be the most beneficial for them and helping them prepare for the event to make them more confident at it. Leveraging social capital after networking events should also be incorporated into business management planning. Research shows that business support that involves more "hand-holding" in the initial phases of ownership results in more success for the business owner.

### *Toolkit for women business owners*

The toolkit for women business owners needs to provide both resources and information. It is impossible to meet the needs of every individual business owner in one toolkit, and therefore we need to also use the toolkit to teach women how to access the information that they need on their own. The toolkit needs to include a "how to" section that discusses how to conduct searches online to make use of the innumerable web-based resources including webinars, templates, and free training programs. With such a plethora of resources available online, the internet is an ideal place to find specific and relevant tools as long as women know where to look. The toolkit should also aim to educate women about the networking and risk taking tendencies that they may be engaging in that, according to the research, could be negatively affecting their financial and social capital. Finally the toolkit should include a self-assessment that allows women to evaluate their own skills and competencies that have been positively associated with entrepreneurship, and provide resources for improvement. The toolkit could also potentially include some confidence building tools for women to encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities available to them and overcome barriers.



## Limitations

This research is only a first step in making improvements to the Niagara Region's entrepreneurial environment. A major limitation of the research is that it is not exhaustive of all of the potential barriers that women may face, nor is it an in-depth exploration of the causes of and potential solutions to any one barrier, but rather a general overview that provides a starting place for further, regionally-specific exploration. Finally we cannot guarantee that all of the research analyzed for this report came from studies using gender-neutral measuring instruments. Further research into regionally specific barriers is needed, as is ongoing trial and error to determine the effectiveness of the proposed solutions.

“Services that are relevant to women business owners and are cognizant of their overall goals for their business and their lifestyles appears to be missing in the Niagara Region and in supports for women entrepreneurs in general.”



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# Solutions

## Success Circles

### Indicator

- Women want more woman-to-woman mentorship

### Response

- Success Circles, a monthly peer mentoring and networking group, have been implemented in Niagara Falls and St. Catharines and are available by request in Welland and other cities in the Niagara Region.
- Women from various sectors and stages of business development attend a structured meeting where they present 3 successes and one challenge to the group, receive feedback, and develop an action plan for follow up the next month.
- Attendance has been consistent in Niagara Falls and St. Catharines and owners of high growth firms and budding entrepreneurs have indicated that the Circles provide them with actionable solutions to their challenges.

## Niagara Women Entrepreneurs Mentorship Program

### Indicator

- Women want more business oriented mentorship from professional role models.
- Personality traits and skills, including willingness to take risks, opportunity recognition, networking proficiency, and management skills, are positively associated with entrepreneurial success.
- Mentorship is a preferred way to learn new skills among business owners.

### Response

- The Niagara Women Entrepreneurs Mentorship Program pairs mentees with mentors that can relate professionally to their business.
- Women with a high proficiency in entrepreneurship-positive skills/traits are selected as mentors so that mentees can work through their specific business challenges by developing and using their entrepreneurial skill set.



# Solutions

## Micro-Business Toolkit for Women Entrepreneurs

### Indicator

- Women need supports that are specific and relevant to their needs and cognizant of their goals.
- Women are often denied loans because their businesses operate in highly competitive sectors.
- Women micro-business owners need a planning tool that incorporates their personal and professional obligations.
- Women are better at evaluating their own skill set when they have a way to calibrate themselves against others.
- Confidence in one's own abilities directly relates to their success, willingness to take risks, and ability to recognize opportunities.
- Women entrepreneurs often do not effectively leverage their networks.
- Women micro-business owners are not accessing the resources available to them, including but not limited to support services, online resources, consultants, sub-contractors, accountants, and advisers.

### Response

- The Micro-Business Toolkit for Women Entrepreneurs is specifically branded to appeal to women business owners to encourage them to use the resource.
- The toolkit includes the following sections:
  - **Getting Started:** Tools to help the entrepreneur understand their competitive position relative to the market they are entering.
  - **Entrepreneurial Skill Set:** Tools to help the entrepreneur evaluate their own skill set.
  - **Micro-Business Planning:** Tools to guide the entrepreneur through start-up and plan out their business-life balance.
  - **Financing:** Tools to self-evaluate the entrepreneur's financial risk taking tendencies and FAQs about external financing with PenFinancial.
  - **Networking:** Tools to self-evaluate the entrepreneur's networking tendencies and tools to help entrepreneurs leverage social capital.
  - **Your Team:** Tool to help entrepreneurs determine which outside contractors/consultants they should be working with.
  - **Resources:** A comprehensive list of organizations offering entrepreneurial support services and information about accessing online resources.



# Solutions

## Optimizing Niagara For Women's Entrepreneurship Conference

### Indicator

- Women micro-businesses are not recognized as legitimate businesses, they are seen as hobby/lifestyle businesses and therefore less valuable and worthy of support.
- Women entrepreneurs in Canada have reported feeling unsupported by advisers at entrepreneurial support service locations.
- Business owners are unaware of what programs and services are available and do not access them even when they are aware of them.
- There are several barriers that an entrepreneur faces that are self-imposed. The self-imposed barriers that the average woman entrepreneur faces are different from those that the average man entrepreneur faces. Most support services available do not account for this gender difference and therefore services are not as relevant to women business owners.

### Solution

- Advocacy for the economic importance of women-owned micro-businesses and the fostering of a better relationship between women business owners and support service providers.
- Increase awareness among entrepreneurs about what services are available to support them.
- Disseminate the final report for *Improving Prosperity for Niagara's Women Business Owners* to be used by economic development officers, entrepreneurship support professionals, and other regional planning bodies to develop future programming.
- Advocate for more equitable programming for women business owners through the implementation of systemic solutions.



# Feedback

“ Today was my first time attending, and I found it to be very informative and well directed by the facilitator. I highly recommend attending if you are a business owner and you are trying to get through any blocks you're going through. It was a great session of sharing my story and hearing others. The best part was getting feed back from each participant as to what my next steps might be. I am looking forward to next months meeting to follow up and check in on my progress. ”

- Success Circles Member

“ It has given me back a passion for my business that has been missing for too long...ability to keep motivated and accountable and focus on my current goals. ”

- Success Circles Member

“ Great place to meet other business ladies and learn. ”

- Success Circles Member

“ Wow! This sounds like an amazing and perfect match...You're doing amazing work. ”

- Mentorship Program User

“ Thank you very much. I am so excited I can hardly type...I can't tell you how much I appreciate this opportunity. It gets lonely. ”

-Mentorship Program User

“ I felt like I won the lottery. ”

-Mentorship Program User





# Looking Forward

## Systemic Solutions

### Modifications to Existing Services

- Using advocacy and education, ensure all services being offered are cognizant of (and account for) the different barriers women entrepreneurs face.
- Use targeted marketing to ensure services are being marketed to women entrepreneurs. Focus on *why* women should use services, not just *what* services are available.
- Rather than offering a presentation on a specific topic for the duration of a workshop/seminar, begin with a short presentation and then invite entrepreneurs to apply the knowledge to their specific businesses while the presenter comes around offering specific and relevant support.
- Use smaller group sizes with several "experts" to offer one-on-one support.

### Business Planning and Execution Support Service

- Develop an execution-focused business plan.
- Incorporate finding, securing, and strategically using financing from a variety of sources (including grants).
- Plan to balance time and finances between personal and professional obligations.
- Determine outsourcing and consultation needs (e.g. hiring an accountant vs. doing their own books).
- Select and prepare for strategic networking events and appropriately leverage contacts.
- Refer to relevant workshops, seminars, and tools.

### Workshops, Seminars, and Tools

- Continue to update the "Micro-Business Toolkit for Women Entrepreneurs".
- Offer workshops specifically focused on developing entrepreneurship-positive skills (opportunity recognition, confidence, networking, management know-how, risk taking).

### Mentorship

- Continue to offer and update "Success Circles".
- Continue to offer and update the "Niagara Women Entrepreneurs Mentorship Program".



# Thank You

## THANK YOU...

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You share in these results and the future of optimizing entrepreneurship for women business owners in Niagara!







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