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Knowledge Hub

See it. Be it.

A Showcase of Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs

TED ROGERS SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

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Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub

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The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) is a national network and accessible digital platform for sharing research and resources, and leading strategies. With 10 regional hubs and a network of more than 250 organizations, WEKH is designed to address the needs of diverse women entrepreneurs across regions and across sectors. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, WEKH adopted a leading role connecting women entrepreneurs and support organizations across the country, and led network calls and training sessions. WEKH's advanced technology platform, powered by Magnet, enhances the capacity of women entrepreneurs and the organizations who serve them by linking them to resources and best practices across the country.

With the support of the Government of Canada, WEKH spreads its expertise from coast to coast, enabling service providers, academics, government and industry to enhance their support for women entrepreneurs. Toronto Metropolitan University's Diversity Institute, in collaboration with the Ted Rogers School of Management, is leading a team of researchers, business support organizations and key stakeholders to create a more inclusive and supportive environment to grow women's entrepreneurship in Canada.

Sponsors

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Executive Summary

Indigenous women entrepreneurs play a critical role in the Canadian economy and their ability to balance traditional values with modern business practices offers a model for sustainable and inclusive economic development. For many Indigenous women, entrepreneurship offers financial autonomy and stability, a means to support and engage with their community and a path toward redemption of ancestral lands, self-governance and preservation of cultural knowledge and practices.

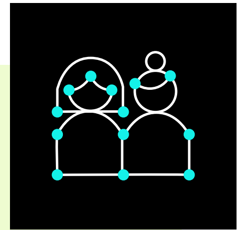
Though Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada are launching businesses at twice the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts, they continue to experience structural barriers and challenges. For example, First Nations women entrepreneurs living on a reserve cannot legally own the land that they live on according to the Indian Act which limits eligibility for business loans and grants. Further financial barriers for Indigenous women entrepreneurs include a lack of savings, poor credit history, risk aversion to debt, lack of available microloans and lack of financial literacy training.

Another common challenge for Indigenous women entrepreneurs is the lack of essential services and infrastructure such as high-speed Internet, financial services, business support organizations, public transit and affordable child care, particularly in rural and remote areas and on reserves. Addressing these systemic barriers requires a concerted effort to reform policies, enhance access to financial and land-based resources and provide culturally appropriate support for Indigenous women entrepreneurs. Supporting Indigenous women-owned businesses is therefore an important step toward Truth and Reconciliation.

Understanding and acknowledging the contributions of Indigenous women entrepreneurs can help challenge stereotypes, reshape social narratives and inspire future generations. To showcase the diversity of Indigenous women entrepreneurs across Turtle Island, this report analyzed cases of 257 Indigenous women entrepreneurs from all provinces and territories, sourced from the publicly available See It. Be It. database of the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH). Launched in March 2021, the See It. Be It. campaign features more than 2,000 profiles of successful women entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds, sectors and regions across Canada.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

This report supplements previous research undertaken by WEKH on Indigenous women entrepreneurs to understand their diversity in terms of geography, industry and Indigenous and intersectional identities, identify commonalities in their businesses and highlight success stories to counter assumptions and stereotypes. In addition, the profiles of nine diverse Indigenous women entrepreneurs from across Turtle Island are included to showcase their innovations and contributions. Finally, the report offers recommendations at the societal, organizational and individual levels to support a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.



This report supplements previous research undertaken by WEKH on ***Indigenous women entrepreneurs to understand their diversity in terms of geography, industry and Indigenous and intersectional identities, identify commonalities in their businesses and highlight success stories*** *to counter assumptions and stereotypes.*

Introduction

Indigenous entrepreneurship is an important contributor to the Canadian economy. There are about 75,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada,[1, 2] with around 23% being owned by Indigenous women.[3]

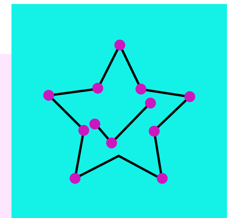
For many Indigenous women, entrepreneurship offers financial autonomy and stability, a means to support and engage with their community and a path toward redemption of ancestral lands, self-governance and preservation of cultural knowledge and practices.[4] According to a recent study by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA), Indigenous women entrepreneurs start their businesses for greater freedom and flexibility, to pursue a passion to create a product or service, for economic independence, to generate income for their family and to achieve a better work-life balance.[5] Entrepreneurship can also be an alternative pathway to traditional employment. A recent study found that in corporate Canada, Indigenous women in leadership positions perceived they are not taken as seriously as their Indigenous and non-Indigenous men counterparts, are subject to higher standards and experience insufficient respect and support for their caregiving, community and professional commitments.[6] Thus, Indigenous women may view entrepreneurship as a more meaningful and culturally safer alternative to a corporate job. However, Indigenous women entrepreneurs continue to experience serious systemic barriers when starting and scaling their businesses.[7]

Supporting Indigenous women-owned businesses is an important step in Truth and Reconciliation, particularly because Indigenous women are more likely to be entrepreneurs; a higher proportion of Indigenous-owned businesses are majority-owned by women (23.2%) compared to non-Indigenous-owned businesses (19.5%).[8] Additionally, Indigenous women often promote Indigenous values in their businesses through sustainability practices. A study found that 73% of Indigenous women-owned businesses use traditional knowledge or traditional cultural expressions in their businesses.[9] Therefore, Indigenous women entrepreneurship is an important pathway to cultural preservation and revitalization.

Yet, Indigenous Peoples in Canada are not a homogenous group, and barriers may be exacerbated by intersecting identities. There are significant differences in the experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurs depending on their geographic location, industry, racialized identities, disabilities, sexual orientation or gender expression.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

It is important for future generations to have role models that guide them and show them what is possible, as many young Indigenous women do not know where to start because they feel they are not represented in business.[10] Aiming to highlight the diversity of Indigenous women entrepreneurs, this report analyzed 257 profiles of award-winning Indigenous women entrepreneurs from across Turtle Island in the See It. Be It. database of the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH). The report presents these Indigenous women's diversity regarding their geographical location, industries and Indigenous and intersectional identities, and sheds light on the commonalities in their businesses, with a special emphasis on nine notable cases of impactful Indigenous women entrepreneurs across Turtle Island.



It is important for ***future generations to have role models*** *that guide them and show them what is possible, as many* ***young Indigenous women do not know where to start*** *because they feel they are not represented in business.*

Challenges and Enablers for Indigenous Women Entrepreneurs

In recent years, initial studies have explored the experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurs.[11, 12] These have increased important understanding about the specific barriers Indigenous women entrepreneurs face, as well as their contributions to their communities and the economy.

Though Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada are launching businesses at twice the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts,[13, 14] they continue to experience structural barriers and business challenges when starting and scaling their enterprises. For example, the Indian Act presents challenges for First Nations entrepreneurs living on a reserve in terms of eligibility for grants and loans. According to the Act, all reserve lands in Canada are considered Crown land.[15] As a result, First Nations people living on a reserve cannot legally own the land that they live on. Additionally, the Indian Act prohibits the seizure of property on a reserve by anyone other than an Indigenous person, a First Nations person, or a band.[16] This means that banks cannot seize land on a reserve in the event of a loan default and First Nations people living on a reserve cannot use their land as collateral to secure a business loan as they do not own it.

Moreover, the Act exempts taxation of personal property on a reserve, which complicates the structuring of businesses located on a reserve.[17] At the same time, Inuit and Métis peoples are not subject to the Indian Act but are affected similarly by other federal legislation and court rulings.[6] For example, some non-status First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are ineligible for certain funding streams, programs and possibly award opportunities due to status requirements.[7]

Access to financing has been identified as one of the biggest challenges for Indigenous women-owned businesses. A recent survey of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada revealed that 71% of participants ran sole proprietorships, which lenders frequently view as high-risk.[18] Other common financial barriers for Indigenous women entrepreneurs include a lack of savings, poor credit history, risk aversion to debt, lack of available microloans, lack of financial literacy training and lack of training and guidance to navigate the lending process and understand tax regulations (particularly on a reserve and in remote locations).[19, 20]

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

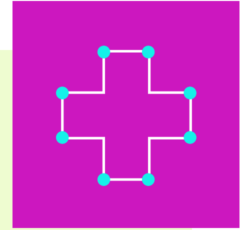
Another common challenge for Indigenous women entrepreneurs is a lack of essential services and infrastructure. According to a recent report by the Auditor General on connectivity in rural and remote areas in Canada, access to high-speed Internet and mobile cellular services in rural and remote communities and on First Nations reserves lags behind urban areas.[21] The study found that 91% of all households in Canada had Internet access that met minimum connection speed targets set by the federal government (50/10 Mbps). However, only 60% of households in rural and remote communities and 43% of households on reserves had the same connection speeds.[22]

Many Indigenous women entrepreneurs reside in First Nations reserves and rural and remote communities with poor Internet infrastructure that are also geographically isolated from financial services, business support organizations, customer bases, suppliers and reliable transportation infrastructure. This, in turn, can exclude many Indigenous women entrepreneurs from engaging in Canadian and international economic activity, building and scaling entrepreneurial ventures, or being recognized for their entrepreneurial achievements. These communities also often lack accessible and affordable child care, which exacerbates the burden experienced by many Indigenous women of balancing family and business responsibilities.[23]

A recent study of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector in Canada's North by the Diversity Institute and the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) found that their remote location implies a lack of services to support business development that does not require online presence or overnight travel, unreliable Internet connectivity and a high cost of shipping. The unique context requires specialized support and flexibility in navigating seasonal infrastructure deficits and emerging challenges in the tourism sector when lenders evaluate business plans and grant applications.

Further, systemic issues such as discrimination, loss of culture, lateral violence, intergenerational trauma and stress and mental health issues affect the ability of Indigenous women entrepreneurs to run their businesses. The Indigenous women entrepreneurs in this study highlighted the importance of Indigenous women mentors and culturally safe and supportive networks to succeed.[24]

Indigenous women entrepreneurs have deep experiences with discrimination and exclusion. European settlers imposed a patriarchal lens on Indigenous cultures in their assimilation efforts and created discriminatory systems, policies and institutions through the Indian Act that especially affect Indigenous women.[25] Institutionalized stereotypes and biases due to overarching Western cultural values have created an entrepreneurship ecosystem in which Indigenous women no longer see themselves.[26] Not being taken seriously as an entrepreneur, lacking confidence and experiencing racism and discrimination makes it challenging for Indigenous women entrepreneurs to participate in activities such as networking events, hindering their success as entrepreneurs. Further, entrenched stereotypes affect how decision-makers such as financial institutions view Indigenous women entrepreneurs, resulting in barriers to access crucial resources.[27]



Systemic issues such as:

> discrimination
> loss of culture
> lateral violence
> intergenerational trauma
> stress and mental health issues

affect the ability of Indigenous women entrepreneurs to run their businesses.

Supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs is a crucial step toward Truth and Reconciliation. Indigenous women have historically faced significant systemic barriers including economic marginalization, limited access to education and discrimination. Empowering Indigenous women through entrepreneurship acknowledges past injustices and aligns with the Calls to Action set forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada related to eliminating social and economic disparities.[28]

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Entrepreneurship also offers a platform for Indigenous women to express their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge and serve as role models by challenging stereotypes, reshaping social narratives and inspiring future generations.

The use of an intersectional lens on Indigenous women entrepreneurs, including the impacts of diverse attributes such as gender, race, migration, age, sexual orientation, legal status and class, is important for comprehensive understanding of how individuals positioned at the cross-section of multiple identities experience exacerbated barriers and unique disadvantages. Across Turtle Island, it has become increasingly important to acknowledge these intersecting identities and the diverse experiences of Indigenous women entrepreneurs when developing policies, programs and opportunities that affect the entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem.[29] Existing data continues to suggest that women with one or more socially marginalized identities experience additional, as well as exacerbated, challenges and barriers to entrepreneurship and innovation. Equity-deserving groups such as women, Black and racialized people, 2SLGBTQ+ people and persons living with a disability are examples of identities that intersect with the Indigenous identities of the diverse entrepreneurs in this report.

To showcase this diversity, this mini report analyzes cases of 257 Indigenous women entrepreneurs from all provinces and territories found in the publicly available WEKH See It. Be It. database, a campaign that features hundreds of successful women entrepreneurs from across Canada.

The Study

Research from the WEKH shows that stereotypes and bias about entrepreneurship are among the most challenging barriers women entrepreneurs face. When asked to name an entrepreneur, most people think of a white man, usually in technology, and this idea is perpetuated by the media.[30] Launched in March 2021, WEKH's See It. Be It. database challenges assumptions about who an entrepreneur is, what they do and how they look. The See It. Be It. campaign features more than 2,000 profiles of award-winning women entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds, sectors and regions across Canada — because women need to see successful women entrepreneurs so they can dare to become one.

This report aims to supplement previous research undertaken by WEKH on Indigenous women entrepreneurs to:

> Understand their diversity in terms of geography, industry and identity

> Identify common patterns in their businesses

> Highlight success stories to counter assumptions and stereotypes

*The study is based on an analysis of **257 award-winning Indigenous women entrepreneurs from all provinces and territories** and sectors in the WEKH See It. Be It. database.*

The study is based on an analysis of 257 award-winning Indigenous women entrepreneurs from all provinces and territories and sectors in the WEKH See It. Be It. database.

We conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the 257 profiles. The quantitative analysis allowed us to gain insights on the Indigenous women entrepreneurs' diversity. The qualitative analysis was done with the software Leximancer to identify patterns in these women's businesses. Finally, we selected nine profiles from the See It. Be It. database to showcase success stories.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Definitions

We use an inclusive definition of "Indigenous women entrepreneur." We consider entrepreneurs to include those who own small and medium-sized businesses, those who own micro-enterprises, those who are self-employed and those who are unincorporated sole proprietors. We also include a full spectrum of organizations, from for-profit entities to social ventures. Further, we use an inclusive definition of women. By women, we mean those who self-identify as women in terms of gender, distinct from sex; this includes cis women, trans women and other women.[31] For Indigenous Peoples, it is important to acknowledge that there is substantial diversity within the broad group consisting of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Within each of these groups, Indigenous communities range in geography from remote to urban.[32]

Findings

Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the See It. Be It. database represent a variety of geographic regions and industries, as well as Indigenous and intersectional identities. At the same time, they display unity in certain patterns in their businesses, as many incorporate Indigenous perspectives, produce and sell artwork and support others in their healing journey.

Geographic diversity

Among the profiles, representation from each region varied, with the highest number of featured entrepreneurs in the dataset being based in British Columbia at 29.6%, compared to the lowest representation in the Yukon at 1.2% and in Prince Edward Island at 0.4%. Other regions with strong representation included Ontario (18.3%), Alberta (13.6%) and Manitoba (8.2%).

The increased recognition of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in these regions may be attributed to a variety of factors, including:

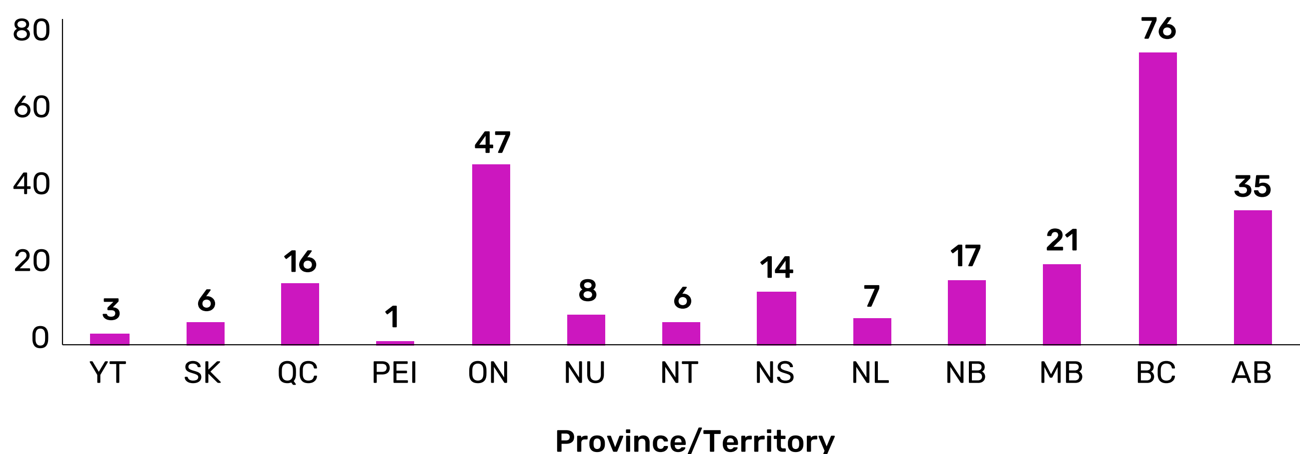
> Total Indigenous population in each geographic area

> Historical reasons for the identification of Indigenous identity

> Geographic isolation

Figure 1

Geographic locations of Indigenous entrepreneurs in this report



The varied population of Indigenous Peoples in each province and territory should be considered in the context of the total population of the area. For example, in 2021, Statistics Canada reported that Ontario had the largest Indigenous population at 406,590 people, followed by British Columbia with 290,210 Indigenous Peoples.[33] However, when looking at the proportion of this population in each province, Yukon (22.3%), the Northwest Territories (49.6%) and Nunavut (85.8%) have the highest representation, while Quebec (2.5%) and the Atlantic provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, 9.3%; Prince Edward Island, 2.2%; Nova Scotia, 5.5%; and New Brunswick, 4.4%) have a lower representation of Indigenous Peoples.[34]

In our analysis of the dataset featured in WEKH's See It. Be It. database, we found strong representation in the Prairie provinces, with a combined representation of 24.1% for Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. This representation corresponds to Statistics Canada's 2021 Census which reported high proportions of Indigenous Peoples living in Manitoba (18.1%) and Saskatchewan (17.0%).

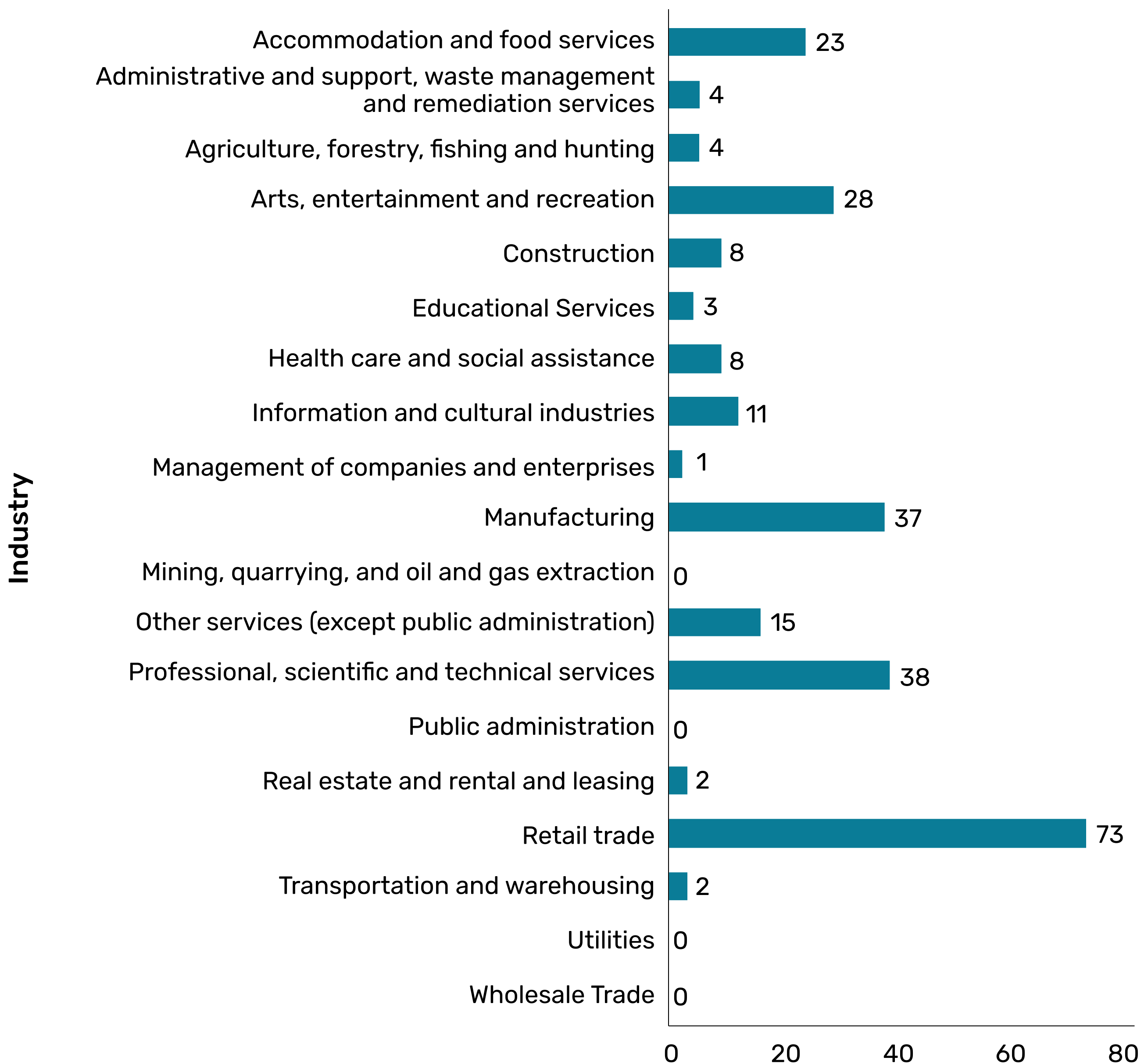
Industry highlights

Industry representation was diverse, with certain sectors standing out amongst the others. A total of 28.4% of the Indigenous businesses analyzed in this report operated under 'Retail trade', and 14.8% of businesses were indicated as 'Professional, scientific and technical services' (Figure 2). There was a high number of Indigenous women running businesses in manufacturing (14.4%), consistent with national data which show that more Indigenous women (18%) run businesses in the secondary sector (processing, manufacturing and construction) than Indigenous men (17%).[35]

Data analysis from a study published by WEKH and the Canadian Council for Indigenous Business (CCIB) found that a higher proportion of Indigenous women-owned businesses were in the service sector (62%) compared to Indigenous men-owned businesses (49%). In contrast, a higher proportion of Indigenous men-owned businesses were in the construction sector (16% vs. 3%) and the primary sector (agriculture and mining, 14% vs. 12%) compared to Indigenous women-owned businesses. A slightly higher percentage of Indigenous women-owned businesses were in manufacturing and retail trade compared to Indigenous men-owned businesses (22% vs. 21%).[36]

Figure 2

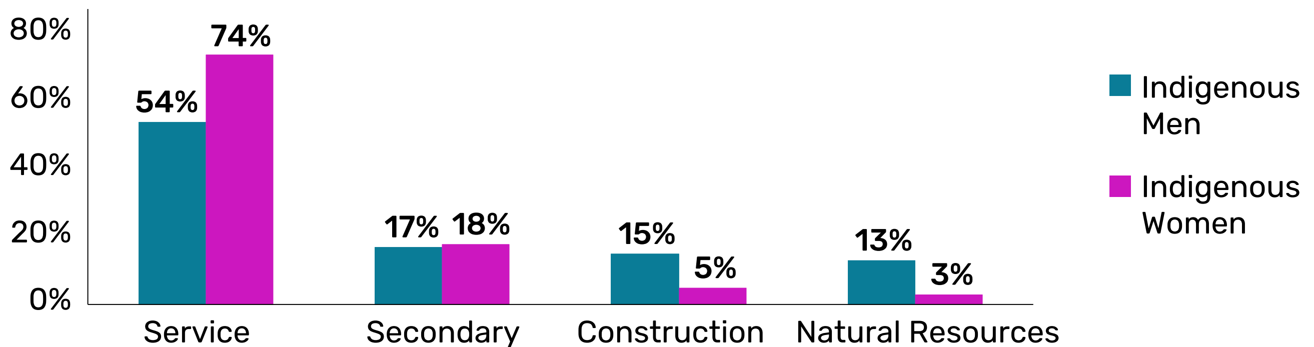
Industries of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in this report



Data from a 2020 report from WEKH and CCIB shows a lower representation of Indigenous women-owned businesses operating in traditionally male-dominated industries, such as construction and natural resources (Figure 3). Outside of the top three results in Figure 2, most of the businesses analyzed operated in 'accommodation and food services' and 'arts, entertainment and recreation', and none were operating in 'wholesale trade', 'utilities' and 'mining, quarrying and oil and gas extraction', consistent with national datasets (Figure 2).

Figure 3

Industry summary of men and women Indigenous entrepreneurs



Source: Morton, S., Jae, K. & Hon. H. (2020). *Indigenous women entrepreneurs.* https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Indigenous_Women_Entrepreneurs_EN_FINAL.pdf

While diverse entrepreneurs with intersecting identities face increased barriers to entrepreneurship and innovation, they continue to develop new ideas, products, services and approaches for both national and international markets.[37] Indigenous Peoples have been innovating and inventing on these lands since time immemorial.

In the See It. Be It. database, Indigenous women entrepreneurs showcase significant innovations in the spaces of technology, like tech-forward, immersive and inspiring learning experiences through ORIGIN,[38] a provider of a full suite of 360 VR solutions that can be found in over 1000 schools and in 80 First Nations; arts and culture, such as Code Breaker Films[39] bringing Indigenous content from an Indigenous lens; and accommodation and food services, where Sijjakkut,[40] a culinary tourism venture, is preserving and promoting Inuit culture.

Indigenous identity highlights

Indigenous identity in Canada is a deeply complex issue, influenced by both external legal frameworks and internal community recognition. Statistics Canada (2023) defines 'Indigenous Identity' as whether a person identifies with the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. This includes those who identify as First Nations, Métis and/or Inuk (Inuit), as well as those who report being Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada) and/or those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.[41] Colonial frameworks, such as the Indian Act, have profoundly shaped Indigenous identity, often in inequitable ways, by defining who is legally recognized as "Indian" in Canada.[42]

Government definitions of "Indian status" contrast with the more holistic ways Indigenous Peoples identify themselves, which often include connections to land, community and ancestry. This becomes especially complex for communities that have lost their land base, as seen in the proposed White Paper policies, or Indigenous Peoples who have been alienated from their communities and culture through residential schools and the "60s Scoop".

Many Indigenous Peoples and communities have been working toward reclaiming their identities through self-identification.[43] While government recognition of status plays a role, community acknowledgment and personal connections to culture and community remain critical factors in self-identification. Today, movements toward self-determination are gaining momentum, supported by international frameworks like the UN Declaration on the Rights

The Government of Canada's 2021 Census found that more than ***1.8 million people in Canada identify as Indigenous, representing 5% of the total population.***

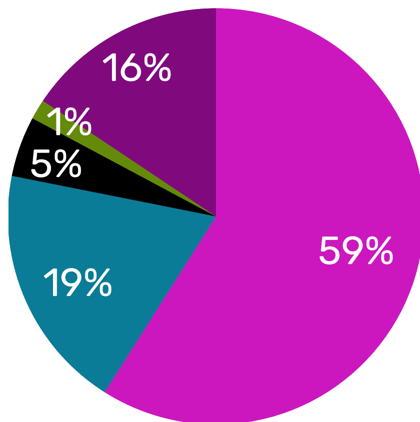
of Indigenous Peoples. Article 3 of this declaration affirms the right of Indigenous Peoples to freely determine their political, economic, social and cultural development, emphasizing their autonomy in shaping their identity.[44]

Despite the complexities and historical challenges, Indigenous communities continue to assert their rights to define themselves on their own terms. Indigenous identity is diverse and multifaceted, influenced by a range of different factors.[45] The Government of Canada's 2021 Census found that more than 1.8 million people in Canada identify as Indigenous, representing 5.0% of the total population.[46] It is important to note that Indigenous Peoples are not a homogenous group, and there is clear diversity amongst Indigenous communities in regards to their culture, languages and histories.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Figure 4

Count of Indigenous identities of entrepreneurs in this report



- First Nations
- Métis
- Inuit
- Multiple Indigenous identitites
- Undetermined

The Indigenous identities analyzed in this dataset were as follows: 'First Nations' (58.8%), 'Métis' (15.6%), 'Inuit' (4.7%), 'Multiple Indigenous Identities' (1.6%) and 'Unknown' (19.46%). The identities analyzed can be categorized into either 'Single Indigenous Identity' or 'Multiple Indigenous Identities', meaning that a person may identify as any two or three of the following: First Nations, Métis and/or Inuk (Inuit).[47] Entrepreneurs whose Indigenous identity could not be determined were marked as 'Unknown'.

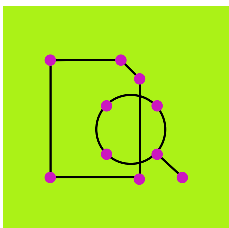
Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Intersectionality

A significant number of entrepreneurs in this analysis identified as racialized-Indigenous entrepreneurs at 12.3%, whereas fewer than 1.0% identified as Black-Indigenous entrepreneurs. Race is only one diversity category we must consider when applying an intersectional lens to entrepreneurship. 2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs, for example, have a sizable impact on entrepreneurship, despite often not receiving the recognition they deserve.[48] This lack of recognition may be reflected in our analysis, as fewer than 1.0% of the Indigenous entrepreneurs identified as 2SLGBTQ+. This insight begs the question of how award organizations and other groups providing recognition to the community are working to acknowledge the intersectionality of Indigenous entrepreneurs, as well as the compounded barriers they experience on the path to entrepreneurship and innovation.

Of the entrepreneurs, 6.1% identified as Francophone-Indigenous. For an inclusive ecosystem, it is important that Francophone Indigenous women entrepreneurs have equitable access to various supports they need for success, and that non-federal government entrepreneurial initiatives are bilingual in their offerings.[49] Barriers around language and accessibility could be overcome for diverse language groups across Canada, including Indigenous languages and dialects, creating more opportunities for recognition of non-English-speaking Indigenous women entrepreneurs.

Of the entrepreneurs analyzed in this report, only two (0.8%) entrepreneurs identified as a senior over the age of 65, whereas nine (3.4%) of the entrepreneurs identified as youth under the age of 29. This is inconsistent with national data, which shows that Indigenous-owned businesses are proportionally more likely to be owned by younger entrepreneurs (younger than 35 years; 14.1% vs. 10.7%) and less likely to be held by older entrepreneurs (65 years and older; 10.9% vs. 15.1%) than non-Indigenous-owned businesses.[50] More generally, Indigenous Peoples continue to be one of the youngest populations in Canada, and also experience overlapping layers of discrimination from various intersecting identities. According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, the Indigenous population was 8.2 years younger than the non-Indigenous population.[51]



According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, the Indigenous population was ***8.2 years younger than the non-Indigenous population.***

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives

Our qualitative analysis showed that about 35% of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the See It. Be It. database incorporate Indigenous perspectives, traditions and/or knowledge into their business. For example, Celeste Smith offers consulting services on Indigenous plant knowledge to reclaim traditional agricultural practices and share Indigenous ecological knowledge. Inez Cook is the co-founder of Salmon n' Bannock Bistro, which offers modern takes on traditional Indigenous meals produced with First Nations ingredients and cooking techniques.

Others explicitly blend Indigenous and Western perspectives according to the principle of Two-Eyed-Seeing, an Indigenous pedagogy that seeks to resemble the strengths of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems for the benefit of all.[52] For example, the co-founders Tessa Lochhead and Karen Nutarak of Pirurvik Preschool in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, committed to blend traditional Montessori principles with Inuit traditional knowledge. Jesse Benjamin from Two Eyed Wellness incorporates sciences with traditional Indigenous knowledge to provide fitness and wellness training to Indigenous people.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

The importance of arts

About one quarter of Indigenous women in the See It. Be It. database run businesses related to arts (either categorized into “arts, recreation and entertainment” or “retail trade” industries). The most common mention of specific artwork is jewelry, followed by fashion and beading. This reflects the importance of artwork for Indigenous women to tell stories of the past, express Indigenous culture and resistance and have a source of income.[53, 54] Art has been identified as a political tool for Indigenous artists to revive their ancestral traditions outside of Eurocentrism, reconnect with their cultural roots and establish a sense of belonging and connection with their land.[55, 56]

In the growing body of research on the intersection of arts, culture and entrepreneurship, Indigenous women entrepreneurs must be an integral part to acknowledge and better understand the importance of arts for Indigenous women to reclaim their culture.[57]

For example, Métis artist Alexis Hekker hand-makes and sells beadwork jewelry, knitted and crochet works and other Indigenous wearable art in her online shop Kootenay Willow Wool. For Natashia Allakariallak, motherhood and her traditional values are the inspiration behind her art and jewelry that she sells through her business Sailiniq, named after her daughter and the Inuktitut term for “to bring peace”.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Indigenous women entrepreneurs' contributions to healing

A number of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the See It. Be It. database offer services related to healing, often to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, but also to the Indigenous population more broadly. Such services include workshops, retreats, counseling, sacred circles and online training.

For example, Jean Erasmus is the co-founder of Dene Wellness Warriors, an Indigenous-focused wellness business based in Yellowknife. Being the only Indigenous therapist recognized by Health Canada to work with residential school survivors and their families, she draws on her own skill set and life experience, including having spent six years in Indian residential schools, to support others in their healing journey. The three co-founders of Clan Mothers Healing Village, Elder Belina Vandenbroeck, Elder Mae Louise Campbell and Jamie Goulet, incorporate the Indigenous matrilineal model of healing into their support for women who have been victims of multi-generational trauma, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Profiles

To empower role models, embrace diversity and counter stereotypes and bias, in the following section we feature nine diverse Indigenous women entrepreneurs from across Turtle Island to showcase their innovations and contributions.

Teara Fraser

For Teara Fraser, Lead Executive and founder of Iskwew Air, the sky is nowhere near the limit. At the age of 30, Teara first realized her passion for aviation while on a flight in Africa. Since then, she's been unstoppable. Teara is a proud Métis bridge builder, commercial pilot and the former CEO of Kîsik Aerial Survey, an air operation she built from the ground up. As a trailblazing pioneer in aviation and the first Indigenous woman to launch an airline in Canada, Teara continues to soar to new heights in uncharted territories.

"I started my own airline because I wanted a place where I belonged. I wanted a place where my kind of leadership was embraced and respected: matriarchal leadership. Our values are love and adventure, the warrior spirit, reclamation and reciprocity."[58]

Julie Bull

juliebull.net

Julie Bull, Inuk and 2SLGBTQ+ from NunatuKavut, Newfoundland, resides in Epekwitk, Prince Edward Island. As owner of Julie Bell: PhD | Poet, they offer professional services including coaching, group training and retainer services, as well as facilitation, performance and poetry for individuals and organizations.

"My life and my work is a way to help dismantle these ways in which we continually perpetuate colonial action,"[59]

Jenn Harper

Cheek Bone Beauty

Jenn Harper, First Nation from Thunder Bay, Northwest Angle 33 First Nation, resides in St. Catharines, in the Niagara Region of Ontario. Jenn is CEO of Cheekbone Beauty, an Indigenous-owned cosmetics company, providing sustainable product manufacturing and development.

"We as Indigenous people have an innate connection to the land, earth, and water. The importance of paying attention to brands that have experience in sustainability is going to be really important for the world going forward."[60]

Patrice Mousseau

satya.ca

Patrice Mousseau, First Nation from Fort William First Nation, resides in North Vancouver, British Columbia. Patrice is owner and creator of Satya Organics, offering health and beauty products available in retail stores across Canada.

"I'm proud to have made a huge impact at SheEO Summit by interviewing and sharing Satya's story with Prime Minister Trudeau in March, encouraging his government to cut the red tape when it comes to supporting women entrepreneurs. Through the story of Satya, I showed him what's possible when you give Indigenous women with no formal business background the chance to do business their way. With the right supports, women can make a huge impact in the lives of thousands, amplifying their initial goals tenfold, making our world a better place."[61]

Modeste Zankpe

mondaymayjewelry.com

Modeste Zankpe, First Nation from Alexander First Nation, resides in North Westminster, British Columbia. Modeste is founder of Monday May Jewelery, providing custom, sustainable, Black-Indigenous cultural designs.

"2020 was a challenging time for me as I had just lost my mother to cancer and was dealing with a life-changing autoimmune condition. Creating jewelry became a source of comfort for me, helping me stay connected to my cultures and my mother's memory."[62]

Mélanie Paul

melaniepaul.com

Mélanie Paul, Innu and Francophone from Mashteuiatsh First Nation in the Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean region of Quebec, resides in Vancouver, British Columbia. Mélanie is the co-president of Akua Nature, a natural health company, and president of Inukshuk Synergy, a sustainable energy solutions company.

"In the family, our entrepreneurial spirit starts from a human need. Taking action and building projects to help people in our community get out of their precarious conditions has always been our driving force."[63]

Andrea Menard

andreamenard.com

Andrea Menard, Métis from St. Laurent Manitoba, resides in Vancouver, British Columbia. Andrea Menard offers professional services including speaking, singing, dancing, acting and wellness workshops for individuals and groups.

"As a mixed-blood person, I spent a lot of time in my younger days tackling identity and what it meant to be Métis. Nowadays, I spend my time helping others understand the Métis experience. I don't shame my audiences, and I'm not out to punish anyone who doesn't know Canada's history. I share knowledge by allowing my vulnerability to be seen. The pain of historical trauma becomes accessible to an audience through me because I have done the work. My hope is others will be inspired to do the same."[64]

Bobbie Racette

thevirtualgurus.com

Bobbi Racette, Cree-Métis from Regina, Saskatchewan, resides in Calgary, Alberta. Bobbi Racette is founder and CEO of Virtual Gurus, an online matchmaking platform that connects remote assistants with freelance entrepreneurs to provide talent service solutions for business.

"I faced barriers as a part of three marginalized groups: Indigenous, female and a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. My goal was, and always will be, to provide fairly paid work to underrepresented folx."[65]

Lindsay Beaulieu

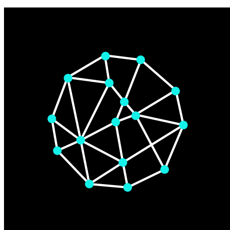
ilovemicrogreens

Lindsay Beaulieu, Métis from Rupert's Land, resides in Red Deer, Alberta. Lindsay Beaulieu is the owner of I Love Microgreens, organic salads grown from three farms supplying the Red Deer community.

"Our business has turned into not just feeding people but feeding your mind, for awareness of mental health, but also awareness of culture and awareness of the Métis culture."[66]

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reviewed the profiles of 257 Indigenous women entrepreneurs from the See It. Be It. database of the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. Findings showed that Indigenous women entrepreneurs are a diverse group representing a variety of geographical locations across Turtle Island, industries and Indigenous and intersectional identities. At the same time, many build their businesses on traditional Indigenous values, engage in artwork and support others in their healing journeys. The nine profiles that are highlighted in this report are only a snapshot of the many innovative Indigenous women entrepreneurs that call Turtle Island home.



*Findings showed that **Indigenous women entrepreneurs are a diverse group representing a variety of geographical locations across Turtle Island**, industries and Indigenous and intersectional identities.*

Supporting Indigenous women entrepreneurs in an important step in Truth and Reconciliation. While Indigenous women entrepreneurs have shown resilience and contribute significantly to Canada's economy and innovation ecosystem, as shown in this report, much remains to be done to further break down barriers. To conclude this report, we reiterate recommendations on societal, organizational and individual levels that will help to make Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem more inclusive.

Societal Level Recommendations

- Advocate for greater government and financial institution commitments to offering accessible grants, loans and micro-financing specifically designed for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
- Improve Internet connectivity, transportation and other essential infrastructure in rural and remote Indigenous communities, as access to these resources is critical for Indigenous women entrepreneurs to participate fully in the digital economy and global markets.
- Continue to improve the collection of disaggregated data to understand the barriers and enablers for Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the economic ecosystem.

- Challenge stereotypes and share success stories that showcase Indigenous women entrepreneurs' achievements.
- Continue to use a "whole of government" approach to unlock access to resources to support Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
- Increase capacity to identify and support promising Indigenous women-owned businesses.
- Nurture a culture of support that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and sharing knowledge by adopting Two-Eyed Seeing.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Organizational Level Recommendations

- Strengthen innovative programs and tailored supports for Indigenous women entrepreneurs according to business stage, sector and characteristics.
- Encourage the development and support of Indigenous-led business incubators, accelerators and mentorship programs that cater specifically to Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
- Encourage financial institutions and investors to adopt measures that reduce gender bias toward Indigenous women entrepreneurs in financing decisions.
- Advocate for businesses and governments to implement inclusive procurement policies that prioritize sourcing from Indigenous women-owned businesses.
- Encourage corporations and non-profits to partner with Indigenous organizations, such as the Native Women's Association of Canada, to co-develop entrepreneurship programs for Indigenous women.
- Increase the accountability of organizations and participants by applying Two-Eyed Seeing to balance Indigenous and Western worldviews.
- Regularly assess the effectiveness of training programs for Indigenous women entrepreneurs through feedback mechanisms and evaluations, and use the feedback to make continual improvements and adjustments.
- Create legal and financial resource toolkits for Indigenous women entrepreneurs that take into consideration the unique funding and legal constraints Indigenous women may face, both on and off reserve.

Photo by Reanna Khan Creative

Individual Level Recommendations

- Create networking opportunities and peer support groups where Indigenous women entrepreneurs can share their experiences and insights.
- Support the development of culturally responsive entrepreneurship training programs that incorporate traditional Indigenous knowledge and values.
- Provide access to mentorship programs that connect Indigenous women with successful Indigenous and non-Indigenous entrepreneurs who can offer guidance, share experiences and open new business avenues.
- Ensure that programs are connected to cultural navigators, elders and ecosystems that offer wraparound supports, including cultural interventions for trauma and triggers.
- Encourage Indigenous women entrepreneurs to acquire skills in digital literacy, e-commerce and innovative technologies to help them compete in both traditional and emerging markets.
- Offer mental health resources and support services for Indigenous women entrepreneurs that include culturally appropriate counseling and self-care practices.
- Encourage Indigenous women to integrate their cultural values and identities into their businesses.

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