

International Women's Day

Friday, March 6, 2026

Produced by Randall Anthony Communications and the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) and the Diversity Institute. The Globe's Editorial Department was not involved.

Women entrepreneurs powering a Canada-strong economy

As Ottawa advances a "Canada Strong" economic agenda, women entrepreneurs are shaping the country's foundations. From construction sites and farms to airline hangars, AI companies, engineering firms and women's health startups, women-led businesses are driving job creation, innovation and exports.

According to the forthcoming State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada: 2026, women are majority owners of 20 per cent of all Canadian businesses. Women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises generate more than \$90-billion annually and employ close to one million Canadians.

Wendy Cukier, founder of the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH), says: "The message is clear: supporting women entrepreneurs is not just about social justice or equity or fairness. It makes good economic sense."

Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) has provided significant investments in financing women entrepreneurs and strengthening the ecosystem, says Dr. Cukier. "WES is unique globally because of its 'whole of government' approach. In addition to investing directly in women entrepreneurs and the organizations and programs that support them, it brings a gender and inclusion lens across policies and programs, whether in research and development, infrastructure, agriculture, environment, trade, health or more to create an innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem that works for all entrepreneurs."

BUILDING CANADA STRONGER

There is no question, however, that while they are gaining traction, women in non-traditional sectors still encounter significant obstacles.

Jennifer Cross is the co-founder of City BuildHERS, an organization that connects women working in construction, design, engineering, architecture, urban planning, development and policy.

"Our cities are imagined, funded and built by men. How can they

reflect our needs, desires and safety if we're not at the table at decision-making time?"

"We need to come together," says Ms. Cross, who is also director of regional development at Chandos Construction in Ontario, a firm specializing in building community infrastructure, including fire stations, social housing and community centres, "projects that matter to me."

Sherry Larjani, who trained in civil engineering and architecture, is but one example of women in infrastructure driving innovation. She is the president and founder of Spotlight Development Inc., co-creating Reina, Toronto's first all-woman development team.

The dire need for affordable housing spurred Ms. Larjani to design and build a high-density residential, commercial mixed-use project: 1,800 units, 10 per cent of which are allocated for Indigenous and Black communities, on a site offering 24-hour child care, medical services and other amenities.

"There are underserved people who are basically not noticed at all. So I decided to put my money where my mouth is," says Ms. Larjani, who financed the project with her own capital and by "knocking on every door," including all levels of government.

What's needed are more voices calling for fundamental change, she says. "If collectively we ask for that, we might be able to make a crack in it."

For Marie St-Gelais, an Innu civil engineer, infrastructure is not only about access – it's about sovereignty. She launched an engineering and project management firm, Ashini Consultants Engineering, after observing that "our communities lack control over the construction of their own infrastructure."

"We need Indigenous voices on these projects because we need different ideas around the table, and also to bring in traditional knowledge of our ancestors" to achieve better outcomes, "not just for Indigenous

communities, but for society in general."

Ms. St-Gelais is frustrated by federal rhetoric about opportunities for women and Indigenous businesses "because it's not happening" at the first-tier contract level. The government must "take a lead" and adapt procurement criteria so those historically excluded can participate, she says.

MOVING GOODS AND SERVICES

But physical infrastructure is not the only area of importance – transportation is vital to a strong economy. In aviation – where women make up only 8 per cent of pilots and 2.5 per cent of aircraft maintenance engineers – Teara Fraser is a trailblazer.

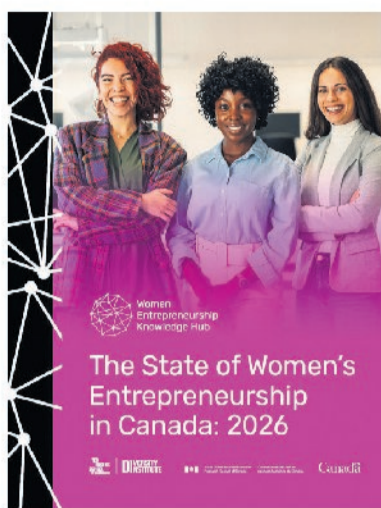
At age 30, she experienced "a truly life-changing moment" flying in a small plane. She decided she wanted to be a pilot. But, a single mom with two kids and no savings, attaining that dream seemed impossible. Until it wasn't.

One year later, she earned a commercial pilot's licence. "I made that possible and then I started making other things possible," including being the first Indigenous woman in Canada to start an airline, launched in 2021.

Iskwew Air, based in B.C. and offering scheduled flights and charter services, "is literally uplifting women," says Ms. Fraser, who is Métis – and named the airline with a word for woman in Cree, the language spoken by matriarchs in her family line.

"Air transportation is critical infrastructure." It's how goods and supplies are delivered and people access medical treatments, she emphasizes. "It's a lifeline for remote Indigenous communities."

And yet, aviation companies must operate under a system in which the federal government collects revenue through airport rents and taxes, a structure that drives up fares and cre-



Women leaders and entrepreneurs across critical sectors are building Canada's future – strengthening infrastructure, advancing innovation and expanding business opportunities nationally and internationally. FRED CHARTRAND

ates investment barriers for regional operators.

Ms. Fraser calls on the government to invest more strategically in aviation, particularly for the North. "Our country cannot thrive without a thriving air infrastructure system."

SUSTAINING THE NATION

Farmers and hunters were arguably the first entrepreneurs, and food security has never been more critical.

"The agriculture sector is definitely struggling with having enough people working," says Phyllis MacCallum, senior program manager of research and knowledge mobilization at the Canadian Agriculture Human Resource Council, noting that labour shortages and limited succession planning threaten food production.

Raised on a cow-calf operation, Ms. MacCallum still farms with her family and co-owns Shamrock Polled Herefords and Valliquette Transport, which hauls livestock across Canada.

Women now account for 79,795 farm operators, representing 30.4 per cent nationwide. Barriers remain,

"but it's getting better," she says. It's about "not being afraid to be at the table with the old boys. When you're invited, take that seat, because there's opportunity for everyone."

LEADING CANADA'S DIGITAL FUTURE

Erin Kelly, co-founder and CEO, askpolly.ai, developed the first AI to probabilistically measure bespoke social media audiences and predict future behaviour from public posts.

Researchers long recognized social media as a rich source of behavioural data, but lacked a way to remove bias. It took Ms. Kelly's team five years to crack the algorithm that would allow for statistically valid research from social media populations. Her company is now ranked #1 globally in this field.

Her tools were credited with helping the Public Health Agency of Canada identify the source of a fatal salmonella outbreak.

"You're not going to ask a survey research company to isolate the source of contamination," says Ms. Kelly. "Their methodology doesn't allow it; askpolly is the only research AI that can."

Unfortunately, securing financing and customers in Canada isn't easy, notes Ms. Kelly.

"When you approach a Canadian customer, they say, 'Give me an example of a project like this you've done before.' When I say this would be the first, they tell me, 'Come back when you've tried it with someone else.'"

"When I approach an American customer, they ask the same question. When I say it would be a first, they say, 'Great. We'll be the first.'"

The barriers of access to capital and customers in Canada are also exacerbated by regulatory uncertainty," she adds

DRIVING CANADA'S ECONOMIC RESILIENCE



BY WENDY CUKIER

Founder of the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University

Amid rising operating costs and trade shifts, the latest research from the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) highlights women-owned businesses as vital engines of resilience and growth. Women now own more than 20 per cent of Canadian businesses and make up almost 40 per cent of self-employed Canadians. Women-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs) employ nearly one million and generate over \$90-billion in revenues. With strategic support in digital transformation, trade diversification and scaling critical sectors, they can propel Canada's economy forward despite challenges.

But that progress is not guaranteed. Recent gains remain vulnerable to mounting pressures at home and abroad.

PROGRESS UNDER PRESSURE

WEKH's *State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada (SOWE)* has tracked the robust progress of women entrepreneurs since 2019. Today, majority women-owned businesses (51 per cent+ ownership) continue to represent 20 per cent of firms. Innovation remains a strength: 38 per cent of women-owned businesses report introducing innovations, compared with 25.6 per cent of men-owned firms.

Yet rising costs threaten the gains made. New tariffs introduced since 2025 have increased the price of materials and supplies, challenged retailers and prompted many businesses to rethink supply chains.

While access to financing has inched up to 27.4 per cent for women-owned SMEs, with a 92.2 per cent approval rate, loan amounts remain smaller (averaging \$127,000) – and higher interest rates constrain expansion. Women-owned SMEs pay 13.7 per cent on lines of credit vs. 10.4 per cent for men-owned SMEs. With higher rejection rates and narrowing debt ratios (41.6 per



The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) convened a half-day Women Build Canada symposium in Ottawa last November, bringing together leaders across critical sectors, including construction, aviation, security, and engineering. From left to right: Marie St. Gelais, founder and president of Ashini Consultants Engineering; April Stone, founder and CEO of Indigenous Stone Corp (APL Protective Services); Teara Fraser, founder and CEO of Iskwew Air; Sherry Larjani, president of Spotlight Development Inc.; Jennifer Cross, co-founder of City BuildHERS and Director of Regional Development (Eastern Ontario) at Chandos Construction; and Victoria Lennox, CEO of the Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC). FRED CHARTRAND

“ Women now own more than 20 per cent of Canadian businesses and make up almost 40 per cent of self-employed Canadians. Women-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs) employ nearly one million and generate over \$90-billion in revenues.

cent compared with 39 per cent in Q4 2025), the cost of borrowing continues to weigh more heavily on women entrepreneurs.

SECTOR BREAKTHROUGHS, FAMILIAR CHALLENGES

Women are making inroads into sectors long dominated by men. Since 2020, representation in construction has doubled to 7.8 per cent, manufacturing has risen to 10 per cent, and agri-food, forestry and mining has reached 9.5 per cent. At the same time, growth in emerging industries is opening new opportunities. The global femtech market, for example, is projected to reach US\$3.81-billion by 2030, reflecting expanding demand for innovations centred on women's health and well-being.

This year's forthcoming SOWE report further highlights the remarkable resilience women entrepreneurs have shown. Statistics Canada data suggest women entrepreneurs are adapting proactively to trade disruptions. In the third quarter of 2025, 15.2 per cent of majority women-owned businesses reported a major negative impact from U.S. tariffs, compared with 19.5 per cent of all businesses; 16.7 per cent reported minor impacts, compared with 17.6 per cent overall. Many responded by seeking alternative suppliers (13.5 per cent compared with 12.3 per cent of all businesses).

Women entrepreneurs are also leading on sustainability, with a significant proportion pursuing social or environmental goals. This orientation aligns closely with the expansion of clean technology, sustainable manufacturing and climate-related innovation, areas

where Canada is seeking global leadership.

STRENGTHENING TRADE AND SUPPLY CHAINS

The federal government's Buy Canadian program encourages domestic sourcing and stronger interprovincial trade to reinforce supply chains in the face of U.S. tariffs. This is an opportunity for women entrepreneurs. Additionally, to address U.S. tariff pressures, the federal government has committed to doubling Canada's non-U.S. exports over the next decade, a goal that underscores the growing export activity of women-owned SMEs. We know that 14.5 per cent of majority women-owned SMEs exported goods or services, nearly matching the share of majority men-owned SMEs at 15.3 per cent. Women-owned SMEs are also more likely than men-owned SMEs to export to non-U.S. markets such as the U.K., India, Brazil and China.

Ensuring that procurement and trade programs incorporate a gender lens would further strengthen these efforts and broaden access to opportunity.

CLOSING THE DIGITAL GAP

While definitions of artificial intelligence (AI) adoption vary overall, Canada continues to lag on AI use. Women entrepreneurs trail men in uptake (12.3 per cent vs. 16.5 per cent), but women excel in software (35.8 per cent).

Recent federal measures in Budget 2025 and new sectoral industrial strategies signal progress. Even greater impact is possible from a continued gender lens when developing economic policy.

Policymakers must prioritize

women to unlock growth. Women need to be at the table for decision-making, and we need to consider women in every aspect of our economic strategy, whether investments in major projects, trade expansion or the Buy Canadian Policy with transparency and accountability.

Second, all industrial sector strategies need to consider women, Indigenous Peoples and equity-deserving groups, whether in infrastructure, energy, critical minerals, defence, agriculture, AI or auto manufacturing. Third, we need to leverage procurement and community benefits to invest in women and their businesses – to unlock access to significant opportunities and remember that building customers is as important as accessing financing. Fourth, we need to bridge rather than exacerbate the digital divide. In particular, our AI adoption strategy needs to take into account the needs of women entrepreneurs.

We need to be bold in providing access to investments and capital as well as innovative microloan programs to support entrepreneurs at every stage of their journey. Finally, we need to harness evidenced-based approaches and strengthen the ecosystem by eroding fragmentation and replicating and scaling best practices.

Excluding women entrepreneurs hampers our ability to achieve our ambitious national goals. Women entrepreneurs create jobs, grow markets, advance sustainability and self-sufficiency, helping communities to thrive. Women entrepreneurs build Canada.

Learn more at wekh.ca