"I'm eager to learn more"

EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS IN
WOMEN FIRST

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ptp Adult Learning and
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In Canada, women face multiple systemic barriers to their engagement and success in training and employment.[1,2] For those who experience multiple forms of marginalization (e.g., due to racism, ableism, poverty, etc.), these barriers are often compounded. Further, members of equity-deserving groups are often underserved by skills training and employment programming.

Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) through the Women's Employment Readiness pilot program, the Women First: Building Skills for Success project brought partners together to deliver employment and skills programming to low-income, disabled, racialized, Indigenous, newcomer, and 2SLGBTQ+ women. Building on existing knowledge and expertise, six service providers across five provinces enhanced their program models through a new Skills for Success curriculum and more generous wraparound supports, among other adaptations.

The Women First evaluation, led by SRDC, was guided by the following question: *What are effective practices in designing and delivering employment and skills training for multiply-marginalized women grounded in an inclusive, intersectional feminist, and anti-oppressive approach?* This was addressed through a range of more specific evaluation questions focused on both implementation (e.g., what was delivered, how, to whom) and outcomes (e.g., learner/staff perceptions, experiences, and reported/observed changes). Informed by feminist and participatory methodologies, the evaluation employed a pre-post design that explored project-wide and program-specific outcomes through a range of quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., baseline/post-program/follow-up surveys with learners, Photovoice and vision board methods with learners, interviews with learners and staff). Images from the Photovoice and vision board activities are included throughout this brief.

This is one of four briefs produced by SRDC to share learnings from the project with a wider audience, including service providers, policymakers, funders, researchers, and community members. It offers a deep dive into a specific aspect of the project, along with findings and recommendations related to that topic. Other briefs, along with the full evaluation report featuring greater detail on the project background and methodology, can be found at www.srdc.org.

Women First project partners:

PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs (PTP): Service delivery & project lead

Construction Foundation of British Columbia (CFBC): Service delivery

Futureworx Society (Futureworx): Service delivery

Manitoba Building Trades Institute (MBTI): Service delivery

Saint John Learning Exchange (SJLE): Service delivery

Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI): Service delivery

Focus Company: Project management

Alberta Workforce Essential Skills (AWES): Curriculum development

Social Research & Demonstration Corporation (SRDC): Research & evaluation

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Women face multiple and systemic barriers to their engagement and success in training and employment, particularly women who face multiple forms of marginalization. In this context, Women First partners – including the evaluation team – understood employment readiness and success in pre-employment training as extending beyond simply finding a job. Indeed, a focus on work, rather than *meaningful or high-quality work* (and the factors to achieve this), can perpetuate systemic inequities for multiply-marginalized women: "Immediate labor-force attachment produces little or no change in the social and economic structure of the workplace or in the larger society with respect to race-ethnicity, class, and gender and provides a large pool of low-wage workers" (p. 1).[3] Moreover,

women are often over-represented in lower-paying sectors, more precarious work that is part-time and temporary, and jobs with fewer opportunities for promotion and career advancement.[4]

Recognizing this context, the programs delivered by service delivery partners in Women First focused on building women's confidence and self-esteem. They fostered foundational and transferable skills that can benefit women in their daily lives and help them work towards their individual life, education, and employment goals. In particular, all partners targeted social emotional skills and integrated a new curriculum focused on adaptability and collaboration from Canada's Skills for Success framework. While supporting personal growth, these skills have also been shown to be important for employability.[5,6] All programs also included enhanced wraparound supports to enable women to take care of themselves and their families, while also having the time and space to build their skills and explore their goals. Overall, partners took a holistic approach to programming, fostering relationships, inclusion, and belonging. Although it was not always learners' primary goal, programs nevertheless promoted employability by increasing skills in career exploration and job search, offering occupation-specific training where appropriate, providing work placements, and connecting women to job opportunities.

Not lose hope (Futureworx learner)	Happiness (Futureworx learner)

"The first photo shows a recently planted flower struggling to survive. It shows my struggle to join the job market in Canada. I tried to have [a job] for the last two years and found out how hard it is. I think there are many people struggling out there. It is very important to organize such a program.

[The second photo] is a beautiful flower that I have been taking care of for months. It reflects my current state: a happy person with a bright future. I now have a job. This happiness is not only because I have income but also [because] it will allow me to integrate with the community. I believe this photo reflects the impact the training program has brought in my life."

This brief focuses on Women First learners' employment journeys, beginning with the goals, motivations, and experiences that brought them to their respective programs. This is followed by highlights of key program components that supported employability, and skills and employment-based outcomes reported by participants.

Employment journeys of Women First learners

Participants in Women First programs tended to be further removed from the labour market, reflecting the multiple and intersecting barriers that women – particularly those with multiple marginalized identity characteristics or challenging life experiences – face. Many women shared challenges related to balancing employment or career progression with caregiving responsibilities (i.e., for children, partners, other family members) and other forms of unpaid yet essential labour that is disproportionately performed by women.[7] For some women, years of enduring and navigating frustrating, disheartening, and exploitative circumstances had taken a toll on their confidence, motivation, and self-esteem. Many reported health challenges, high levels of stress, and extensive self-doubt that further exacerbated the difficulty of finding dignified, well-compensated, and stable employment.

34% of baseline survey respondents reported high self-esteem at the beginning of their program.

Despite these challenges, participants entered Women First programs with hope, grit, and tenacity. Some had specific employment or educational goals, while others were focused on building confidence, self-advocacy skills, relationships, a sense of routine, future plans, or forward momentum. For many, wraparound supports played an important role in their decision to enrol, providing space for women to pursue their goals without sacrificing much-needed support.

> *"I want to be more confident with my choices and to feel better about myself. I really want to go back to school."* (Participant survey response)

> *"I want to have more self-compassion and gain the ability to use my voice when I'm uncomfortable."* (Participant survey response)

While one in five participants were employed at the start of their programs, the majority (90%) reported having previous paid work experience in a range of sectors, most commonly in sales and services (43%) and tourism and hospitality (12%). However, the jobs in which women had worked previously were often positions with limited opportunities for career advancement. Of those with prior work experience (n=109-111), just over a third reported satisfaction with job security (35%) and opportunities for growth (36%) at their most recent job. Less than half were satisfied with their wages (46%). Further, multivariate and regression analyses showed that racialized participants reported lower job satisfaction than non-racialized participants; there were no differences in job satisfaction found between other demographic groups.
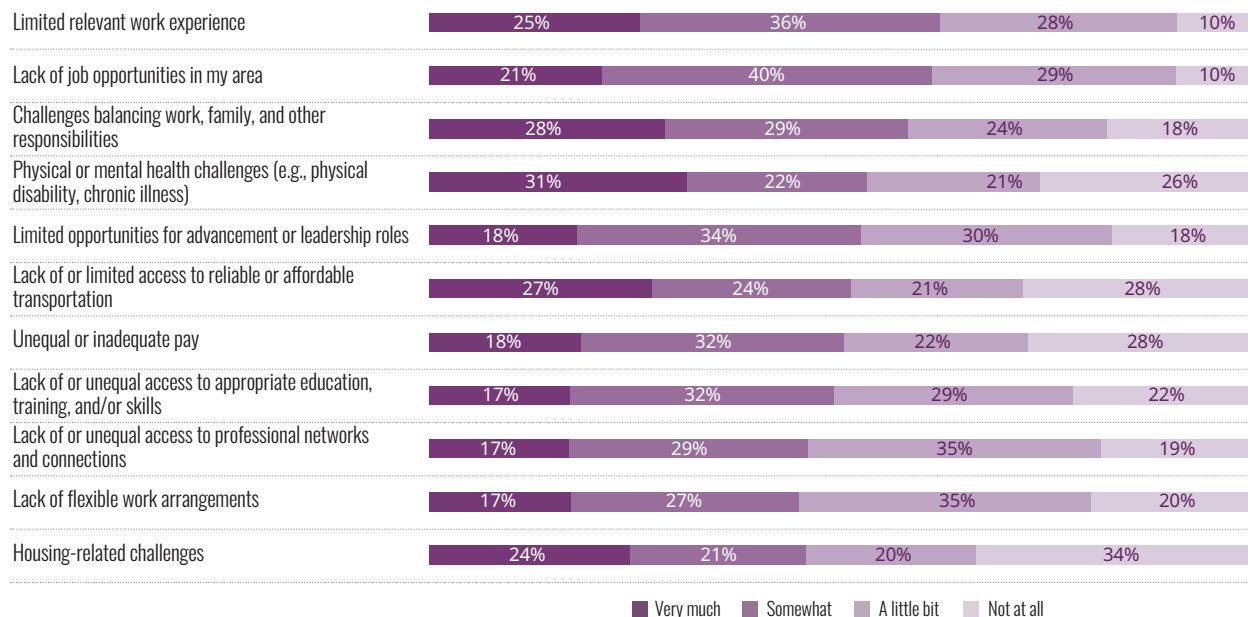
Figure 1 Top reported barriers affecting participants' employment journeys
Source: Baseline survey (n=125-130)

How much have the following barriers affected your employment journey?

Barrier	Very much	Somewhat	A little bit	Not at all
Limited relevant work experience	25%	36%	28%	10%
Lack of job opportunities in my area	21%	40%	29%	10%
Challenges balancing work, family, and other responsibilities	28%	29%	24%	18%
Physical or mental health challenges (e.g., physical disability, chronic illness)	31%	22%	21%	26%
Limited opportunities for advancement or leadership roles	18%	34%	30%	18%
Lack of or limited access to reliable or affordable transportation	27%	24%	21%	28%
Unequal or inadequate pay	18%	32%	22%	28%
Lack of or unequal access to appropriate education, training, and/or skills	17%	32%	29%	22%
Lack of or unequal access to professional networks and connections	17%	29%	35%	19%
Lack of flexible work arrangements	17%	27%	35%	20%
Housing-related challenges	24%	21%	20%	34%

Legend: ■ Very much ■ Somewhat ■ A little bit ■ Not at all

Women First participants reported experiencing a range of barriers to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment. These include barriers related to employment readiness and capital (e.g., experience, education, role models, professional networks), the quality of available job opportunities (e.g., pay, flexibility, benefits, opportunities for advancement), access to resources and material wellbeing (e.g., income/housing/food insecurity, access to childcare), and those related to discrimination, lack of inclusivity, or inadequate accommodations. Figure 1 illustrates the top ten most reported barriers affecting participants' employment journeys.

Women spoke to how physical and mental health challenges exacerbated other barriers in their employment journeys, particularly in the absence of adequate financial, health, or social support. While almost half of Women First learners identified as disabled, others reported chronic health issues without identifying as having a disability. Many chronic pain, trauma-related (e.g., complex post-traumatic stress disorder), and other health issues (e.g., endometriosis, fibromyalgia) are not formally recognized as disabilities and may not qualify women for disability-related social supports or workplace accommodations.[8] As one learner shared, these unrecognized health challenges can limit employment opportunities:

> *"From what I see as an applicant to jobs, there doesn't seem to be much acknowledgement or support for those who aren't exactly disabled, but have health concerns that might prevent them from performing at 100% all the time, [and] who still want to find some employment and contribute to their household."* (Participant survey response)

Other participants shared how their caregiving responsibilities and the division of labour in their households had conflicted with their ability to pursue further education or paid employment. These challenges may be further intensified in systemically marginalized and under-resourced communities:

"For the last 20 years I was a stay-at-home mom, dedicating my life to him [domestic partner] and the kids...I had a few jobs - Boston Pizza, reception, cleaning, odds and ends, but I was a stay-at-home mom. It just made more sense that I didn't work rather than have to pay for bus passes, work attire, that stuff... When we broke up, I was halfway through my business administration degree for accounting. I dropped out; I couldn't deal. I was trying to find a job, but finding a job on the reserve is hard - even living on a reserve is hard." (MBTI participant)

Women are much more likely to experience career interruptions than men, which can limit career advancement and pose challenges when attempting to return to the labour market (e.g., outdated experience, skills not formally recognized).[9] In the context of Women First, three-quarters of baseline survey respondents reported taking a break or pause in employment at some point in their careers (n=119). Among these individuals, about two-thirds (64%) indicated that their most recent employment break lasted longer than six months, with 44% reporting a break extending beyond one year (n=86).

Seasons of change
(Futureworx learner)

"[This] is a picture of a lot of different things. Trees represent changing seasons, growth, deep roots that ground us during hard times. They provide shelter and a home for some animals. They bring stress relief to look at or sit under. This has been a season of change for me, going to this course and getting ready to get back into the workforce after my accident. There has been lots of support through this program."

While women cited a range of factors contributing to career interruptions, nearly half (48%) identified personal health issues as the main contributor to their most recent break in employment (see Figure 2). Further, many participants reported feeling pressured to return work despite ongoing health challenges - either by employers or due to financial need – with negative consequences for their wellbeing. As one participant shared:

"After the sudden death of my father, my previous employer was pressuring me to return before I was ready. Being part-time, they used that as leverage to force me back. I was denied long-term disability, and because I refused to return, I was terminated. Mental health needs to be taken very seriously in the workplace. An employer should not have the right to dictate your grieving process or put a timeline on it." (Participant survey response)

Women First learners also cited childbirth, adoption, or childcare (16%) as well as other family caregiving responsibilities (6%) as reasons for past career interruptions, highlighting the essential and labour-intensive nature of unpaid caring work which is disproportionately performed by women.[10]
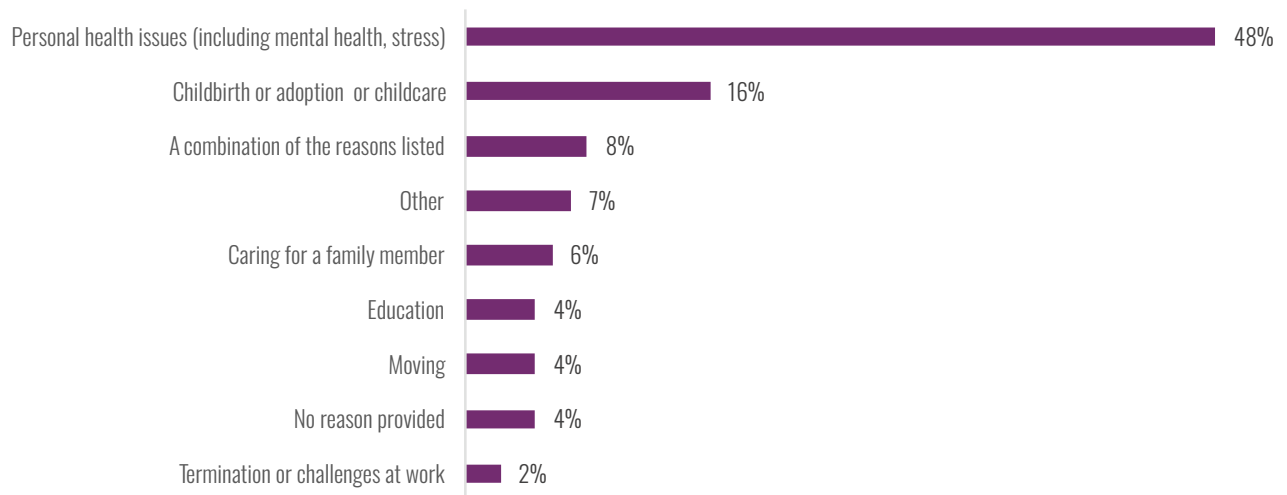
Figure 2 Reason provided for most recent career interruption
Source: Baseline survey (n=89)

Reason	Percentage
Personal health issues (including mental health, stress)	48%
Childbirth or adoption or childcare	16%
A combination of the reasons listed	8%
Other	7%
Caring for a family member	6%
Education	4%
Moving	4%
No reason provided	4%
Termination or challenges at work	2%

Participants typically characterized career interruptions as a negative experience, in part due to the shame and stress associated with *"the feeling of being a failure when unemployed"* (participant survey response). This also impacted on individuals' motivation to return to paid, formal work; as one learner shared, *"it is hard to return to the workplace...[there is] fear of judgment, added stress when thinking about it"* (participant survey response).

However, not all experiences of career interruptions were viewed negatively. A minority (15%) of Women First learners described these breaks as somewhat or very positive. For some women, a break from employment offered a chance to escape a harmful work environment and reflect on their expectations for safer, more inclusive workplaces in the future:

> *"I had to quit my job due to the stress and burnout. The given time helped me to reflect, learn self-care strategies, and be more aware for my next employment journey...For newcomer employees the workplace should be more friendly and less stressful and provide them with training and orientations to make things...easier."* (Participant survey response)

For others, these breaks allowed them to prioritize their mental health and care for themselves. Several participants expressed a desire for shorter-term employment pauses to be normalized and made more accessible:

> *"Taking breaks is very good for my mental health, but when it comes to financial support, it is not good."* (Participant survey response)

> *"They should be more available. Mental health breaks for 2-4 weeks could help with burn out."* (Participant survey response)

What partners did
PROGRAM & TRAINING HIGHLIGHTS

Recognizing learner needs, program staff placed an emphasis on flexible, inclusive, and individualized goals related to employment and skills. They focused on building confidence, capacity, and skills to creating conditions for learners to identify and pursue next steps that they identified as important. This was often - but not always – related to gaining employment. While partners shared broad similarities in their target audiences and desired outcomes, approaches to offering programming differed widely, including program elements specifically focused on skill-building and employability. The diversity of program content and delivery approaches reflected different strengths and priorities of partner organizations, the needs of their learners, and the local context. Just a few of these approaches are described here.

CFBC's program had learners obtain their drone certifications, connecting women with a growing industry and opportunities for remote work or employment in their local communities. The certification was a large draw for many women. In later cohorts, CFBC responded to emerging interests reported by learners, offering an entrepreneurship course and a certification in the film industry.

At SGEI, learners were given opportunities to explore different cultural and technical skills (e.g., working in woodshop, sewing cultural pieces, arranging flowers). One participant elaborated:

> *"We did rattle making, we did our moccasins that we're doing now, we made our skirts, we made our drum bags, we made our drum, and then we also made a ceremony blanket... I really appreciated that we had the opportunity to make all of these things...to take home and take some of those teachings and maybe even share it...I'm really glad that those were offered because I would have never made those at home."* (SGEI participant)

MBTI provided skills exploration and development in the skilled trades, providing women with tools and training in a range of construction trades. Both SGEI and MBTI connected learners with local employers, which resulted in employment for some women following the program. Similarly, Futureworx coordinated work placements for learners with local employers, in some cases leading to participants gaining employment at the end of their programs.

At SJLE, Women First participants employed with the social enterprises had opportunities to apply the social emotional skills targeted through the program directly in their work. Program facilitators were also able to use real-life examples from the social enterprises in the training. Meanwhile, PTP contracted a dedicated skills instructor for their programming, who drew on the Skills for Success and other curricula to engage with learners alongside sessions on specific digital and life skills, including those identified by learners (e.g., using specific computer software/programs, income tax filing).

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

In addition to the unique aspects described above, all programs delivered Skills for Success training to support learners' development of social emotional skills. For the purposes of Women First, Skills for Success curriculum and resources focusing on adaptability and collaboration were developed by project partner AWES and provided to program sites.

There were varying levels of uptake of this curriculum among partners, based on the perceived relevance for different groups of learners and the existing capacity for delivering Skills for Success training across organizations. For example, MBTI chose to implement pre-existing social emotional skills training that had been developed specifically with Indigenous learners in mind. In other cases, the curriculum and related activities were adopted – and often adapted – to meet learner needs while aligning with existing training components. The abbreviated project timeline compared to the original project workplan also meant that some partners were unable to integrate the curriculum into their first cohorts, and instead adapted pre-existing curriculum to fill in these gaps.

Some programs shared concerns about the cultural relevance or the suitability of the Skills for Success curriculum for different populations of learners, including those with varying existing skill levels. This finding highlights the challenges and risks of implementing general curricula for diverse groups of learners, and the importance of providing adequate time and resources for training organizations to either develop curricula or tailor existing resources to better respond to their learners' needs.

Land-based learning
(SGEI staff)

"What you're looking at here are Ojibwe Spirit Horses. They're a smaller and furrier breed, and ideal companions. I wanted to share this photo because working with these particular horses, one learns how to care, lead, ride. To do this involves trust - trusting the horse and trusting oneself. Respect and patience are also being built here, as well as confidence.

By implementing land-based learning, women are connecting land to learning, which is so important. We found there was greater connection, attendance, and excitement when we took this trip. Bringing an endangered species of [learners'] ancestors back to [them], that was really important...Relating to the horse, connecting to the past, bringing healing. Women were calm, patient."

Employability & skills outcomes

The intentional effort to create programs in which women could focus on skill development in a safe and supported environment resulted in significant skill gains and improvements in wellbeing. Participants reported significantly higher career adaptability skills, social emotional skills, and digital skills following Women First programs.

CAREER ADAPTABILITY

The evaluation sought to capture changes in several areas related to career adaptability, including career decision-making self-efficacy (i.e., participants' confidence in their ability to assess their skills and interests, engage with professionals in their desired field, and make informed career choices), job search clarity (i.e., participants' understanding of their career goals and desired job type), and job search efficacy (i.e., participants' confidence in their ability to perform key job search activities such networking, writing resumes, or conducting interviews).

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess if there were significant gains in career adaptability skills during the program period (comparing baseline and post-program scores) and if these gains were maintained over time (comparing baseline and follow-up scores). Women First participants reported significant gains across all measures of career adaptability, and retained these gains in the follow-up period (see Appendix A).

Comparing baseline and post-program surveys, the proportion of respondents who reported low scores across career adaptability measures (i.e., less than 3 on a 5-point scale) decreased substantially, from a range of 51% to 70% at baseline to a range of 28% to 35% post-program. The largest gain was in job search self-efficacy skills, where the proportion of participants who reported high skills (i.e., 4 or more on a 5-point scale) increased by 18 percentage points, from 27% at baseline to 45% post-program (see Figure 3).

In the follow-up survey, respondents were significantly less likely to identify "lack of job opportunities in my area" as a barrier in their employment journeys compared to the baseline survey. While this finding does not discount the structural and systemic nature of this barrier – particularly its relevance to women – it does suggest that the career adaptability skills gained through Women First programs may have positively influenced participants' perceptions of the employment

How I feel towards the future
(Futureworx learner)
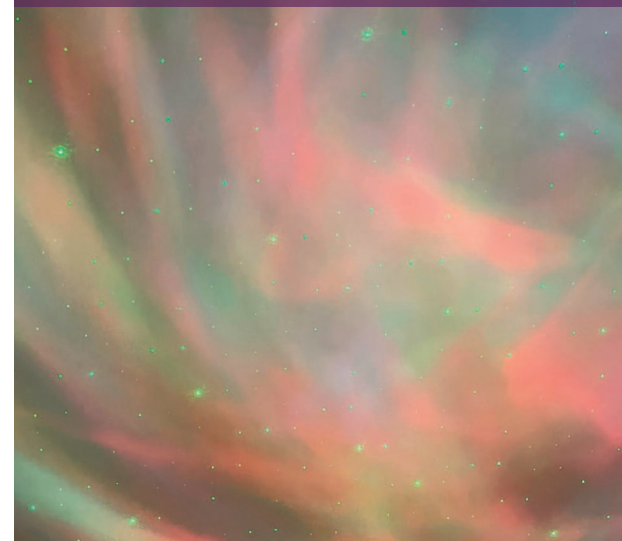
"The colours represent my feelings towards the future. At the beginning of this program I sort of had an idea of what I wanted my future to look like, but now I have set goals for my future. I'm hopefully going back for my grade 12 in September at Nova Scotia Community College, and then I'm going to try to get into NSCC for my Early Childhood Education degree. I have a bright future ahead of me. This program has made me come a long way from where I was in the beginning."
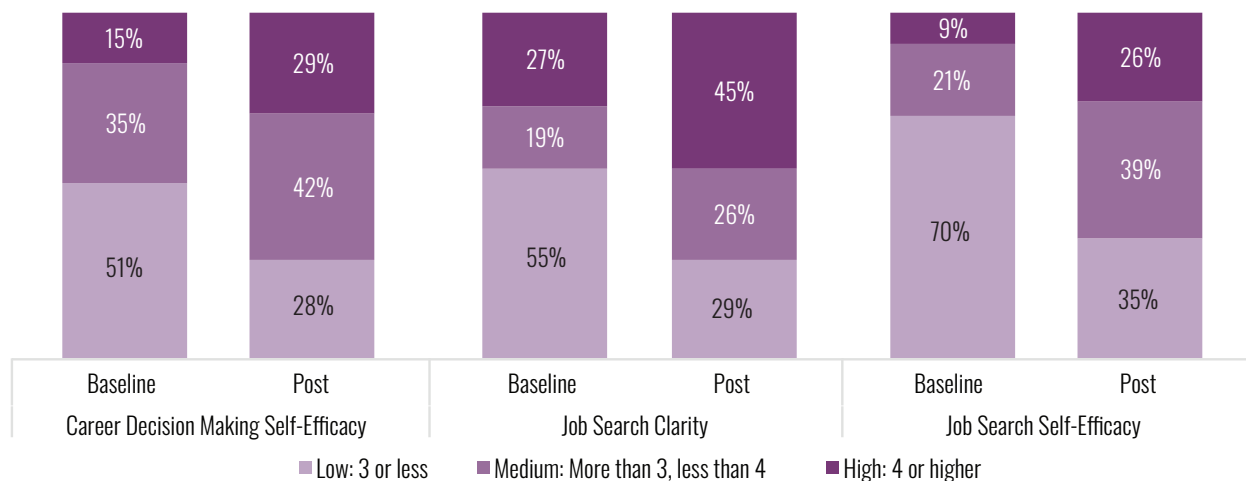
At follow-up, learners were significantly less likely to report lack of job opportunities in their area as a barrier

Figure 3 Distribution of career adaptability skills (baseline to post-program)
Source: Baseline and post-program surveys (n=95-97)

	Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy	Job Search Clarity	Job Search Self-Efficacy

■ Low: 3 or less   ■ Medium: More than 3, less than 4   ■ High: 4 or higher

opportunities available to them. Moreover, learners in some programs gained additional sector or occupation-specific skills that they believed enhanced their employability:

> *"I'm coming out of [the program] with the knowledge: how to build things, how to build anything. I know how to wire a light switch and a conductor. I know the different types of wires we use. With plumbing, how to take apart a sink, how to put it back together, how to take apart a toilet and get it back together..."* (MBTI participant)

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Another set of paired sample t-tests assessed the significance of change in social emotional skills. Participants reported significant gains in social emotional skills from baseline to post-program. These gains were retained during the follow-up period, although there was some decrease in self-reported skills between the post-program and follow-up surveys (see Appendix B).

As shown in Figure 4, the proportion of participants who reported high (i.e., 4 or more on a 5-point scale) Skills for Success increased across every skill and facet measured. The proportion of participants who reported high digital skills increased by 22 percentage points, from 21% in the baseline survey to 43% in the post-program survey. In interviews, learners commented on the opportunities they had to build digital skills, particularly in the programs delivered by CFBC, SGEI, and PTP:

> *"The computer skills were really different. I thought I knew everything about computers...but once we started to go through the courses in the workshops and stuff, I was like, 'that's so different, it's an eye-opener.' [The program] taught me Microsoft Word and Excel and how to [manage]...email and stuff. It helped me a lot."* (CFBC participant)

Figure 4 Distribution of Skills for Success (baseline to post-program)
Source: Baseline and post-program surveys (n=101-103)

| | Low: 3 or less | Medium: More than 3, less than 4 | High: 4 or higher |
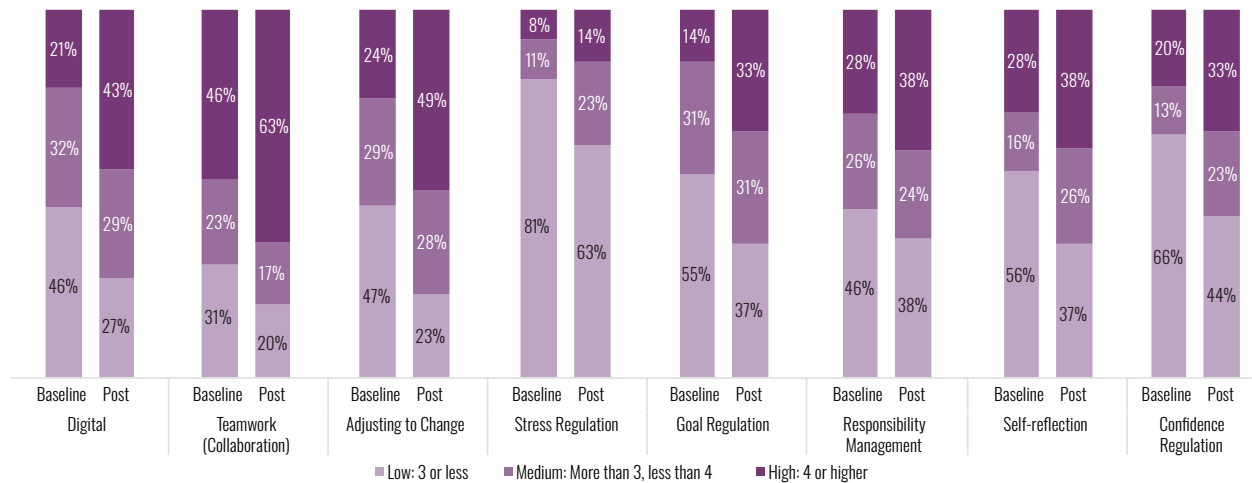
Teamwork skills also showed a large gain, with the proportion of participants reporting high scores increasing from 46% at baseline to 63% post-program. Participants shared that working with the other women in their cohorts was one factor that helped them build their skills:

> *"[There were] lots of changes, just getting used to working in a group even – teamwork, in a good way. Because we're all Indigenous women, [but] we have such diverse backgrounds and education levels and ages, right? So I think we really had to - or I really had to – be aware of that and understand how to work better as a team member."* (CFBC participant)

Among the adaptability skill facets, the largest skill gain was seen in adjusting to change, which increased by 25 percentage points (from 24% at baseline to 49% post-program). Stress regulation showed the smallest change and the lowest overall scores, with only 14% of participants reporting high skill scores in this area, even after the program.

In addition to those measured in the evaluation surveys, qualitative data collection activities revealed several other skill gains reported by Women First learners. Women widely reported increases in other Skills for Success areas, including communication, reading, writing, and numeracy. More broadly, participants reported that through engaging in programs and building skills, they felt more confident, motivated, and energized.

> *"The hands-on [aspect of the program] is my favourite, I'd say. Especially with the math, how he [the instructor] made it sound so easy. Back in school it was so difficult how they showed us. He showed us...step by step, division, doing measurements, how to use a tape measure, angles, length and width...Math wasn't my best subject before...[now] I'm eager to learn more."* (MBTI participant)

> *"[I've improved] my social skills, just being able to talk in front of people."* (SGEI participant)

> *"I just have more confidence now. I feel like I have more confidence to get back into the workforce, to actually talk to people and have proper conversations."* (PTP participant)

SUBGROUP ANALYSIS

To better understand the program outcomes of participants from different population groups, we conducted a series of analyses to assess subgroup differences in career adaptability, social emotional skills, and digital skills. These analyses revealed no significant trends indicating differences in baseline skills or skill gains for Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, racialized, or newcomer learners, although some isolated differences were observed. This suggests that broadly, there were no significant differences in the baseline skills of Women First learners associated with diverse social locations (e.g., newcomer status, 2SLGBTQ+ identity). These results also suggest that participating programs were effective in serving diverse groups, with most participants achieving and maintaining similar levels of skill gains throughout the project.

One notable exception to these findings was related to disability. Reporting a disability was found to predict significant differences in social-emotional and digital skills, but not in career adaptability skills. Compared to non-disabled participants, learners who reported a disability entered Women First programs with lower levels of social emotional skills. Regression analysis found that disability significantly predicted baseline social emotional skills scores ($r^2 = .04$, $F(2,131) = 2.86$, $p < .019$).

Despite this, disabled participants demonstrated similar levels of skill gains during the program period compared to non-disabled participants. Regression analyses using disability as a predictor for pre-post change and controlling for baseline score found no significant difference in change in social emotional skills ($r^2 = 0.33$, $F(3,97) = 15.73$, $p = .943$) or digital skill scores ($r^2 = 0.13$, $F(3,95) = 4.73$, $p = .350$). However, during the follow-up period, disabled participants exhibited a larger drop in skills compared to non-disabled participants. Regression analyses indicated that disability significantly predicted lower changes between baseline and follow-up survey scores for digital skills ($r^2 = 0.21$, $F(3,39) = 3.48$, $p < .05$) and showed a sub-significant trend for social-emotional skills ($r^2 = 0.42$, $F(3,41) = 9.77$, $p = .087$).

Combined with narratives from the qualitative data, these findings suggest that Women First programs enabled disabled participants to achieve skill gains comparable to other participants, highlighting partners' aptitude for effectively and equitably serving a diverse range of learners. Such outcomes may be attributed to partners' emphasis on accessibility and flexibility within Women First programs. Additionally, the program's enhanced wraparound supports may have been distinctly valuable for disabled learners, who face increased risks of poverty and financial precarity that can hinder skill development.[6,11,12]
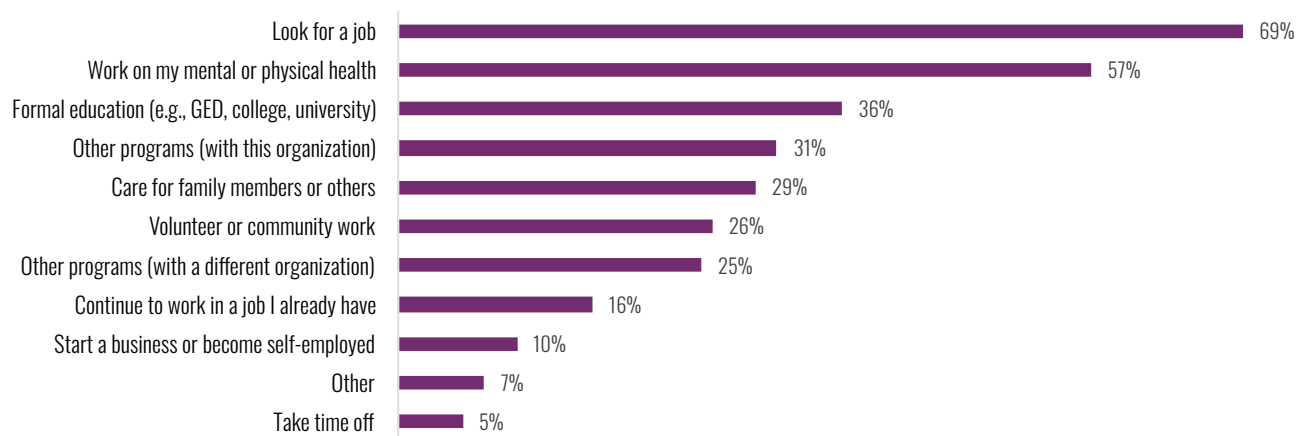
At the same time, disparities in baseline and follow-up scores between disabled and non-disabled participants highlight pre-existing inequities across some of these skill areas. These results suggest that – in the absence of ongoing supports or accessible opportunities to further develop and apply the skills learned in programming – the barriers faced by disabled participants persist, particularly after programs' completion. This underscores the systemic and structural challenges that may explain the initial lower skills and the more significant drop in skills at follow-up for participants with disabilities, rather than implying that disabled people are inherently less skilled.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

In the post-program survey, learners identified their plans for after Women First programs (see Figure 5). Most often, these included looking for a job (69%), working on their mental or physical health (57%), and pursuing formal education (36%). Some participants planned to return to work in positions they held prior to the program. Others successfully found new roles while enrolled in programs, including learners who were offered a position via their work placement or through an employer partner of their organization.

Figure 5 Learners' plans following Women First programs
Source: Post-program survey (n=113)

Plan	Percentage
Look for a job	69%
Work on my mental or physical health	57%
Formal education (e.g., GED, college, university)	36%
Other programs (with this organization)	31%
Care for family members or others	29%
Volunteer or community work	26%
Other programs (with a different organization)	25%
Continue to work in a job I already have	16%
Start a business or become self-employed	10%
Other	7%
Take time off	5%

When probed further about their goals following the project, women shared a wide range of plans, including clear objectives related to employment, further education or training, and participation in additional skills development or employment programs. Some shared plans for engaging in community advocacy, volunteering, or starting businesses.

The employment outcomes achieved in Women First were closely related to outcomes in other areas of women's lives, including health and wellbeing. For example, one participant elaborated on how obtaining a new position aligned with her goals would better equip her to care for her family, volunteer, and pursue further education:

"I plan to do several of the above. As a full-time mom I always care for family members. The field I am going into will be great for both my physical and mental health. As a result of better headspace, I would like to be able to volunteer. I will be continuing with my formal education to continue to upgrade my skills (and pay) at my upcoming position." (Participant survey response)

Others reported increased motivation to care for themselves and prioritize their mental and physical health. For some, this meant a renewed focus on seeking accessible employment opportunities that offered appropriate accommodations and could facilitate access to mental health supports:

"[After the program I will] focus more on mental and physical health. Search for jobs that are work from home and flexible. Maybe start exploring sonography as a field to work in and do required studies for it." (Participant survey response)

"I want to take better care of my mental health...no matter the cost. I need therapy weekly or so. This is obvious to me now." (Participant survey response)

While participants reported increased confidence in their skills, many still expressed concerns about ongoing barriers and challenges, including systemic and structural factors that would continue to affect them despite being better equipped to navigate these systems. For example, one participant shared worries about disability discrimination, as well as employers' willingness to provide appropriate accommodations:

"I have two job interviews lined up this week. Overall, I feel confident that I will do fine for the interviews. What I'm worried about is the possible lack of accommodation for physical disability or not being hired due to being honest with admitting that I have a physical disability."
(Participant survey response)

The big guns
(SJLE learner)
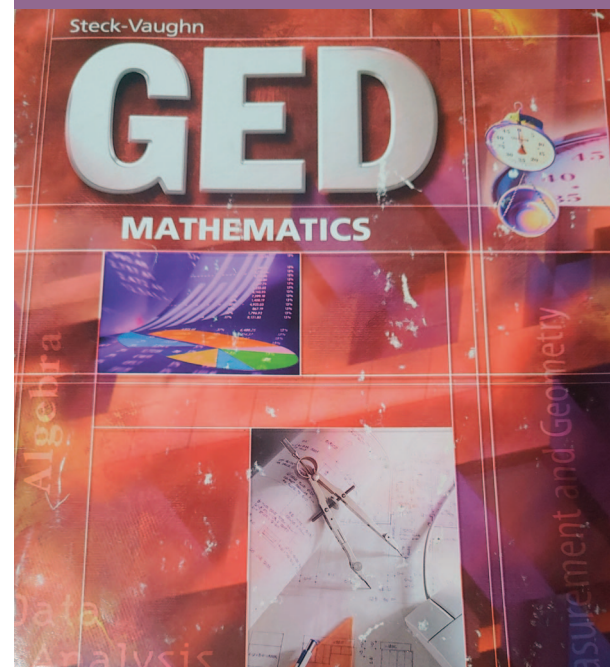
"I call this 'the big guns' – AKA, the GED math book. I want to share this photo because I'm determined to pass my GED math exam. It speaks to how resilient I am. This photo tells others that the Learning Exchange does not give up on people! I've worked on math since 2011, and here we are in 2023."

Despite strong skill gains, many learners were concerned about structural or systemic barriers that might outlast Women First programs.

As learners concluded Women First programs, they described a range of feelings, including pride, excitement, nervousness, fear, and anxiety. While they anticipated ongoing challenges, women described their programs as directly contributing to their improved ability to manage these varied emotions, build resilience in the face of adversity, and continue to pursue their most important goals:

"I am feeling more confident about the next steps. I take rejection better than before." (Participant survey response)

"I am nervous about pursuing my goals because [I] am afraid of failure. However, due to the support and understanding I gained from this [program] I know that I have the strength to meet my goals or at least try." (Participant survey response)

"Being a part of the program for the past three months has boosted my confidence to pursue employment with confidence." (Participant survey response)

Overall, women shared that their participation in Women First programs directly contributed to their increased motivation, confidence, and momentum to take steps forward. Beyond career pathfinding, participating programs offered short-term yet essential support to women in the form of reduced financial stressors, skill-building opportunities, access to mental health resources, and a dedicated environment for self-exploration and goal-setting.

I am ecstatic! The job I am transitioning to is the first position I have ever CHOSEN to go for, instead of NEEDING to do....and has been a lifelong dream. On top of that, I will be in the same school as my daughter. As a mom who has always schooled or worked full-time, it will make me feel much more connected to my family. The women's project helped me be able to reach these goals quicker. Moving here was a large financial setback. With the help of this project, I was able to put a large enough dent in the debt I had incurred to be able to confidently commit to this position without having to worry about needing to work nights and stretching myself too thin. Aside from financial help, the program allowed me to speak with a therapist who acted as a sounding board for me. Having the space to dedicate time to ME encouraged me to pursue the position in the first place. (Participant survey response)

Reflecting on program delivery: Learner & staff experiences

WOMEN AS PEOPLE, NOT ONLY AS WORKERS

The positive outcomes of Women First programs extend beyond increased employability and connection to the labour market. While learners demonstrated strong skills gains that are expected to predict and promote positive employment outcomes – indeed, several program staff shared anecdotes of participants finding employment shortly after their program ended – both learners and staff challenged the notion that outcomes are valuable only or primarily as they relate to paid employment. Participants spoke to the ways in which a heavy employment emphasis can focus on building them up as *workers*, at the expense of supporting them as *people*:

"If it's a women's program, let's help women to be their best self with agency and choices. Let's not tell them how their agency should be applied, but let's help them to discover it. When they discover it, they'll know if entrepreneurship or a job is for them, or if they just want to volunteer."
(PTP participant)

Home bound, work in progress, dreams of the future
(Shania McAuley, MBTI learner)

"I am from Sagkeeng First Nation. I lived there for most of my youth and moved to BC for high school. I am First Nations, but not connected to any traditions. My parents were not into spirituality besides the usual Catholic Church stuff. I work at Tim Horton's. I am an Aunty of 4. I am a sister to 3 siblings. I am an introvert. I love reading.

I've been learning a lot. I like the idea of learning a trade. I'm still undecided. I like the work that goes into a trade. It makes you feel accomplished when you finish a project. I feel out of my depth sometimes but willing to learn. It just means I'm learning and I love it.

I'm slowly becoming independent and financially stable. I want to have a stable, meaningful career. Something that I'll be proud of and that has value. I think learning a trade might be that."

Many participants shared how Women First programs provided the space, confidence, and skills to work towards their self-determined goals. While programs often had an emphasis on employment, practitioners sought to connect the training to learners' individual goals, centring their autonomy as it relates to work and career progression:

> *"The upside has been the way the program has been rolled out thematically in terms of building the person up. We've done accountability, setting core values, connecting your core values to your job search and making those connections…The way the worksheets and the layout of the work was done is exceptional."* (PTP participant)

Additionally, several learners noted that Women First programs enabled them to better provide for their children and families, both financially and through the intergenerational sharing of the skills, knowledge, and increased self-esteem gained in the project. For others, these programs were a rare opportunity to do something for themselves, rather than for their children, domestic partners, or families.

Women First programs helped learners support their children and families, both financially and through sharing skills, knowledge, and confidence gained from the project.

The fact that supporting women often has spillover benefits for their children and families—benefits that are not as pronounced when supporting men—has frequently been used as a rationale for funding women's programs and initiatives. While women perform essential and often invisible work in their roles as mothers and caregivers, our findings point to the importance of providing provide funding, support, and opportunities that prioritize women's personal growth and wellbeing as valuable goals in themselves.

ORGANIZING TRAINING CONTENT & MEETING DIVERSE NEEDS

While feedback from learners was overwhelmingly positive, there were instances across all sites where some participants perceived certain content or activities as less relevant, valuable, or interesting to them. Each of the organizations delivering Women First programs offered a high volume of content and structured it differently. At times, there was uncertainty among learners about how different elements of content fit together (e.g., wellbeing and specific skill-focused training). This was particularly challenging when learners felt that they were spending more time on certain material at the expense of something they found more interesting or valuable. For example, some participants shared that they would prefer more focus on wellbeing and social emotional skills, while others wished there had been more time spent on specific digital skills or job search skills.

Moreover, the varying education levels, skill sets, experiences, goals, priorities, and needs of learners presented challenges for instructors. At times, it was challenging to meet the diverse needs and preferences regarding pacing, mode of delivery (i.e., in-person or remote), and content itself. While the diversity of learners enriched Women First programs and provided opportunities for peer learning, these challenges also underscore the importance of clearly communicating what employment and skills programs will cover to manage learner expectations, as well as building and delivering flexible programming that can be adapted to accommodate different needs.

These challenges extended beyond the classroom to include other program components. For instance, the integration of work placements into some sites' programming sought to meet learners' diverse needs by bridging the gap between training content and real-world application. While seen as valuable, these experiences also underscored the value of early, ongoing, and comprehensive employer engagement to enhance employment and skills training programs:

"It was a little hectic on [the facilitator's] end when the work placements came up. I could see that it was stressing her out and the work placements were a little wishy washy and that they weren't really solidified or really guaranteed - or maybe there wasn't enough emphasis on us to really look into it early enough for [the facilitator] to get those phone calls in [to employers]. And then [the facilitator] just had a bunch of, I would say, uncooperative employers, people who weren't willing or weren't able to help with the work placement." (Futureworx participant)

THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

Experienced, knowledgeable practitioners were invaluable in meeting the complex needs of Women First learners in their cohorts. Practitioners often tailored the curriculum or activities depending on the group, responding to the energy learners brought to class each day. In addition, instructors often adapted material to maximize its relevance for participating learners:

"After the first [curriculum module]...some of the stories...created a discussion of 'okay, this kind of felt like a story of a white person.' We would kind of bring in a discussion about, 'what do you think that might look like with an Indigenous example?' Not rewriting curriculum, but kind of creating that story and answering the questions from that view, because that was easier for some of the participants to answer versus [them being] like, 'well, I don't really have an experience like that.'" (CFBC staff)

The ability to adapt to meet diverse and often unspoken needs in real-time requires highly skilled and experienced practitioners, including those with shared lived experiences or perspectives as learners themselves.

Key takeaways

Overall, program delivery partners in Women First demonstrated a strong commitment to serving the project's intended learner population: multiply-marginalized women who were relatively distant from the labour market and facing complex, multiple barriers. In this context, the programs delivered by partners sought to offer flexible and inclusive training and supports, centring on personalized goals while responding to unique, complex, and changing circumstances in women's lives. These practices are consistent with a feminist and anti-oppressive approach to employment and skills training, recognizing and prioritizing the individualized identities, experiences, and aspirations of learners, including those who continue to be underserved in these contexts.[4,13]

However, the diversity of learners' goals in Women First programs and the individualized support provided by program staff highlight two key themes for further reflection by those who fund, design, deliver, and evaluate employment and skills training programs. First, it is important to consider how diverse, individualized definitions of success can be recognized and supported while also demonstrating program outcomes in ways that are coherent and meaningful to funders. Second, designing curricula that incorporate broadly applicable and effective best practices while allowing for adaptation to meet individual and group needs should be a priority.

REDEFINING SUCCESS IN PRE-EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING PROGRAMS

Success looks differently for everyone, and holding all learners to the same standard risks excluding meaningful and impactful gains. For instance, just showing up to a classroom every day for a program can often be an important and meaningful accomplishment for training participants. Our findings highlight how shifting the focus away from short-term employment outcomes (i.e., attainment) towards individualized definitions of success and progress towards personal goals is not only valuable but essential, particularly when supporting learners more distant from the labour market. Pursued within a holistic, feminist, and anti-oppressive approach to programming, such a shift recognizes that not traditional, full-time employment may not be accessible to or desirable by all learners, and asserts the value of volunteer, care, and other unpaid contributions to society.

"We have people who are older [in the program]. I don't see them going back [to work], but that doesn't mean they are useless. There's a place for them, if we can get them thinking the right way of how do you reconnect back with society?...It could be volunteering. There's an older person...she bakes cakes, and they're really good. I said, 'you could do YouTube videos.' She was like 'you know, I've thought about it...' And so maybe for her it's entrepreneurship, right? How do we explore those things in a way that [learners] feel comfortable and don't have to hide those desires and the gifts that they bring to the program because the conversation's always around how do you get your resumé done and get back to work." (PTP participant)

In many cases, gains related to confidence, social emotional skills, and overall wellbeing are essential parts of the journey to employment. In this context, milestone-based pathways – "a sequence of interconnected milestones or outcomes that show how that achievement of earlier outcomes creates conditions that increase the chance of achieving later outcomes"[14] (p. 2) – offer a helpful framework for contextualizing and appreciating diverse forms of success in employment and skills programs. This approach views the journey to employment as a series of connected steps, recognizing that programs may have their most significant impact in the early stages, while still ultimately contributing to employment as an intermediate or longer-term outcome. Further, it acknowledges the enduring efforts of staff and learners and encourages the celebration of progress and successes along the way. This perspective also highlights the need for programming and supports along the full pathway. Typically, the end goal is not simply employment, but sustained employment and ideally career progression. In many cases, as one partner described, *"the barriers don't end when you gain employment."* Supports such as job coaching, continued wraparound supports, and skills upgrading can increase the likelihood of retention in the labour market. In other cases, structural or policy changes represent important steps to addressing obstacles beyond the scope of employment and training programs.

Beaded earrings
(SGEI staff)

"This is pair of beaded earrings made by a woman in the program prepping for her first-ever market. She was so nervous. It was cool to do more mentorship within the program – for instance, knowing how to price what you're selling to reflect your worth. Employment doesn't look the same for everybody."

### TAILORING PROGRAMS TO LEARNERS & LABOUR MARKET CONTEXTS

Findings from the Women First project point to the value and effectiveness of skills training focused on foundational and transferable skills (e.g., adaptability, collaboration) for a wide diversity of learners, in this case multiply-marginalized women. Because of the transferability of these types of skills, they are also consistent with an approach that prioritizes diverse and individualized goals and understandings of program success. Nonetheless, ensuring instructors have the flexibility to adapt curriculum to individuals and groups of learners can be an important contributor to positive and relevant training experiences. This could include adopting a more explicit trauma or cultural safety lens, accommodating diverse access needs and learning styles, or integrating traditional or cultural knowledge, among other potential practices.

Program activities should not only be tailored to the women being served, but also to the context in which these women are living and engaging with the labour market. Engaging with local and regional employers and sectoral stakeholders can inform program design (e.g., prepare women for jobs and careers that have high demand, ensure skills meet job requirements), promote community buy-in and awareness of economic opportunities, and facilitate post-program connections for learners (e.g., work placements, further training, networking).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Transferable foundational skills training

Identify, adapt, or develop training curricula such as Skills for Success that are effective for diverse learners and have broad applicability and transferability in terms of outcomes. These characteristics support training programs' capacity to be adapted to support a range of goals and objectives prioritized by individual or cohorts of learners. This includes those related to employment, confidence and self-esteem, social networks and sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing, among others.
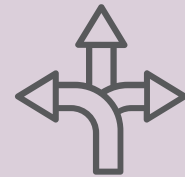
2 Programming tailored to learner needs and context

To the extent possible, service providers should tailor curricula and supports to individual and group needs to ensure relevance and safety for learners (e.g., trauma-informed approaches, emphasis on cultural safety, commitment to accessibility). Engaging local employers to align programming with the local labour market may be another useful practice. Further, a transparent and consistent intake process can help establish and manage expectations among learners. Beyond facilitating informed participation, the intake process can build buy-in among learners and foster an understanding of the program's relevance, considering their past experiences, current lives, and future goals.

3 Recognizing diverse definitions of success

Measure, report, and value a diversity of program outcomes (e.g., confidence, skills, wellbeing, personal goals or achievements) in addition to those explicitly related to employment and labour market participation. As a tool, milestone-based pathways are one helpful framework for demonstrating the interconnectedness of these varied outcomes in women's journeys to employment, including how these earlier outcomes can support future education or career endeavours. In recognition of this, funding for employment and skills training programs should be suitably flexible to acknowledge and support the value of early successes on the pathway to employment.
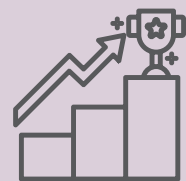
4 Support progress along the full pathway to employment

Funders and service delivery providers should prioritize the adequate resourcing and provision of program activities and wraparound supports that assist learners on their full journey to employment, including the hiring and onboarding process, retention, and career progression.

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Appendix A: Career adaptability skills

Career adaptability: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – post-program)
Source: Baseline and post-program surveys

	Baseline mean	Post-program mean	Change	Significance (p-value)	N
Job search self-efficacy	2.86	3.41	0.55	*** 0.000	97
Job search clarity	3.16	3.67	0.51	*** 0.000	97
Career decision-making self-efficacy	3.08	3.53	0.45	*** 0.000	95

Career adaptability: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – follow-up)
Source: Baseline and follow-up surveys

	Baseline mean	Follow-up mean	Change	Significance (p-value)	N
Job search self-efficacy	2.73	3.10	0.36	** 0.003	41
Job search clarity	3.09	3.59	0.49	** 0.004	43
Career decision-making self-efficacy	2.97	3.38	0.41	** 0.008	43

Appendix B: Skills for Success

Skills for Success: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – post-program)
Source: Baseline and post-program surveys

	Baseline mean	Post-program mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Social emotional skills	**3.19**	**3.53**	**0.34**	***	**0.000**	**101**
Adaptability - Adjusting	3.30	3.74	0.44	***	0.000	100
Adaptability - Goal regulation	3.14	3.52	0.38	***	0.000	101
Adaptability - Confidence regulation	3.03	3.41	0.38	***	0.000	98
Adaptability - Stress regulation	2.56	2.93	0.37	***	0.000	101
Adaptability - Self reflection	3.22	3.56	0.34	***	0.000	98
Collaboration - Teamwork	3.75	4.01	0.26	***	0.000	100
Adaptability - Responsibility management	3.42	3.60	0.18	*	0.014	100
Digital skills	**3.23**	**3.65**	**0.42**	***	**0.000**	**99**

Skills for Success: Paired sample t-tests (baseline – follow-up)
Source: Baseline and follow-up surveys

	Baseline mean	Follow-up mean	Change	Significance (p-value)		N
Social emotional skills	**3.22**	**3.40**	**0.18**	*	**0.015**	**45**
Adaptability - Adjusting	3.26	3.50	0.23	*	0.038	45
Adaptability - Goal regulation	3.10	3.31	0.22	*	0.050	45
Adaptability - Confidence regulation	3.02	3.26	0.23	*	0.036	44
Adaptability - Stress regulation	2.57	2.89	0.31	**	0.009	45
Adaptability - Self reflection	3.38	3.54	0.16		0.235	44
Collaboration - Teamwork	3.72	3.84	0.12		0.107	43
Adaptability - Responsibility management	3.54	3.54	-0.01		0.930	45
Digital skills	**3.35**	**3.46**	**0.11**		**0.2725**	**43**