"Strength in numbers"

RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING, AND COMMUNITY IN WOMEN FIRST

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"Strength in Numbers": Relationships, Belonging, and Community in Women First.

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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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Research highlights the strong link between income and feelings of isolation and belonging, with the latter also closely tied to overall health and well-being, particularly mental health.[3,4] Additionally, social isolation and loneliness can stem from deep-rooted structural inequities, shaped by various and intersecting systems of power.[5] These insights are especially pertinent for the Women First project, which aimed to support women experiencing multiple forms of marginalization based on gender, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and so on.

From its inception, Women First partners anticipated that the women attending their programs might be facing isolation and a lack of social support. For service providers, building trust and relationships with learners was not only key to fostering an environment where women could engage and succeed in training, but also an important goal in itself. Nurturing connections and a sense of community – while deemed essential for the project's success – are not always measured or valued as program outcomes, particularly where skill gains and job readiness are the priority of funders. To address this gap and reflect partners' experiences and priorities, the Women First evaluation specifically sought to explore learners' relationships and sense of belonging as they progressed in programs.

The evaluation revealed a common thread among the diverse group of Women First participants. In addition to a stronger sense of belonging, learners were able to cultivate meaningful and valuable relationships with other learners, program staff, and their broader communities. These outcomes – and what contributed to them – are the focus of this brief.

Compared to before learners' participation in a Women First program:

77% reported bigger networks of people to turn to for support
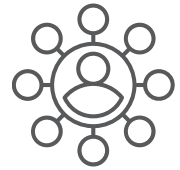
77% said they gained new role models or mentors

81% felt more supported overall

Source: Post-program survey (n=110-111)

"Growing together":
CULTIVATING LEARNER CONNECTIONS

In bringing together participants with shared experiences and goals, programs not only equipped learners with skills training and wraparound supports, but cultivated an intentional space for them to foster friendships. Both learners and staff consistently identified the bonds and trust formed within programs as among the project's most powerful outcomes.

Nearly 90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had developed positive relationships with other learners.

Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

Project partners adopted various strategies to nurture this environment. In some cases, programs leveraged collaborative projects to hone practical skills while strengthening a sense of community: MBTI participants practiced their trades skills by working together to build sheds, while some SJLE learners bonded through their care for a community garden. Staff and learners also spoke to the significance of programs being

specifically for women, suggesting that this *"created a safer environment and allowed for discussions to be more authentic"* (CFBC staff). Meanwhile, peer support – from organized peer-led coaching sessions to casual exchanges of knowledge or expertise – contributed to a sense of solidarity and reciprocity. As one SGEI learner reflected, *"I feel like I do have a lot of life experience that I've shared with [other learners]…A lot of stuff that they're going through right now, I've been there"* (SGEI participant).

Sometimes, relationships were cultivated outside of the classroom: on WhatsApp, over dinner after class, or – in the case of PTP – at a bowling alley in celebration of International Women's Day.

For many, program cohorts represented small but mighty communities where learners could be their authentic selves, share their thoughts and ideas, and access peer support in a safe and non-judgmental way. As one SJLE learner reflected:

> *"Other participants are a huge source of support. It's really cool that we get to meet all these people from various walks of life who each have their own story. To be able to meet them and for them to become part of our lives and us part of theirs, it's very enriching."* (SJLE participant)

Emerging friendships between learners offered opportunities to practice the skills being developed in programs, from boundary-setting to active listening. What's more, the care and accountability exchanged between learners frequently extended outside the classroom, from a ride to the grocery store to a text message checking in following an absence from class. For still others, these friendships offered a powerful example of what healthier relationships based on shared values, experiences, and goals might look like. As one participant reflected:

> *"I feel like being a part of a group of women from all walks of life, all coming together for similar reasons really makes you feel safe and accepted. Coming from an individual who has been lacking in the friend department for years, it's been an amazing journey for me to get myself back out there, in little steps at a time… Knowing that there are people there to cheer you on, or actually truly believe in you is such an amazing feeling… It changed my own pessimistic outlook on my future into a more hopeful and optimistic view!"* (Participant survey response)

These boots are made for walking, not standing still
(Rhonda DeCoff, Futureworx learner)

"It's a boot, but not just a boot. It represents strength, support, and it stands out. When I wear these boots I feel the strength of all the power of women in my life. They were purchased at Frenchie's on our diva on a dime trip.

It needs to be reinforced, to me anyways, that my journey and any great events that come to pass didn't occur just on my own abilities. My faith reminds me that my Creator walks with me; women (both friends and family) walk with me wherever my journey takes me. You may feel alone, but you never really are. There is strength in numbers and we can all help make another's boots strong.

I am strong, practical, and not afraid to stand out. The program and Futureworx helped reinforce and strengthen my boots. Community is meant to be explored with a good pair of boots."

"There is just something so empowering and beautiful to see about a group of women from all walks of life, different ages, different life experiences, different backgrounds -— just so much diversity in the program — but they all learn something from each other, and they all connect over something. They were making friendships and connections, and they're just so supportive of each other. It's been really amazing to be able to watch that and also be like, 'I'm part of that.' A lot of the women have never experienced a safe or healthy environment with other women or just in general, so the fact that they feel safe here and comfortable, that's huge for them."
(Futureworx staff)

When considered through a feminist lens, loneliness is not only a deeply felt emotion but also a structural condition arising from intersecting systems of power and oppression.[5] This was widely reflected in learners' accounts of their lives before Women First programs, with many describing experiences of loneliness and isolation associated with chronic pain or illness, caregiving responsibilities, substance use, recent immigration to Canada, income or housing insecurity, a lack of leisure time, and systemic marginalization or exclusion, among other factors. Several described the challenges of making and sustaining meaningful friendships as an adult. Others were trying to re-establish their social networks in response to a recent move, breakdowns in existing relationships, or a desire for connection following social and physical distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, Women First programs offered a beacon amidst the structural conditions that reproduce social exclusion among marginalized communities. In other words, they fulfilled not only training needs, but social and emotional ones as well. Survey results underscore this, with nearly three-quarters (74%) of learners (n=110) reporting reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation by their program's end. This was widely echoed in conversations with learners:

"Being able to be in a group of women every day is very empowering. To feel like you're not alone, because life out there as an adult woman when you're on your own is very isolating. I felt more connected to my peers, and I felt more connected to the community."
(Futureworx participant)

Through programs, participants actively cultivated relationships that transcended generational, political, and cultural boundaries, fostering a rich tapestry of shared experiences. On one hand, learners valued the opportunity to connect with individuals whose backgrounds and experiences differed from their own. At the same time, many pointed to the collective affinity rooted in a shared commitment to learning and growth despite challenges: *"We're all going through our own thing, but it's just nice to know that you're really not completely alone in the world"* (SGEI participant).

Shared experiences of struggle - from intergenerational trauma to poverty to single motherhood – reduced feelings of shame and facilitated an environment of trust, comfort, and vulnerability. As one learner reflected:

"I used to be afraid to tell people that I had food security issues because they'd say 'that person's poor, they can't afford food' and where I'm from you got judged for stuff like that. Whereas here it's just like, 'oh, it's terrible that you can't afford food. How can we help?'... We're all coming from similar walks of life." (SJLE participant)

The relationships cultivated between Women First learners – while a key feature of the project – came with their own set of challenges. Interpersonal conflicts did occur in some cases, with risks including disengagement or further discord within the group. Harmonious relationships were not automatic: they required nurturing through clear group norms and expectations, established conflict resolution processes, and skilled facilitators who could serve as mediators when necessary. Furthermore, several participants expressed concerns about sustaining these newfound relationships after programs ended. This points to the need for mechanisms to ensure that the solidarity and support systems built during programs can endure, especially outside of a more structured classroom setting.

You come here and you realize you're not the only person dealing with what you're dealing with. You're not growing alone — you're growing together, which can lead to you having another support system of people who understand... It helped open me up. I didn't feel so locked in. (SJLE participant)

There's always sun after rain
(Jain Parks, SGEI learner)

"The roots start off as me pregnant, overworked, stressed, confused, alone - no friends or family. Before the program I was always alone. I thought something was wrong with me or I was a loser and that's why I deserved to be alone. Coming here and having people to talk to meant the world to me. Making friends in today's world is hard, and the program helped me. It's important for people to understand that having a proper support system and friends really helps you realize what you want to do. There definitely is generational trauma that affects us, but we can overcome it as a group of women."

"This place really does care":
## ORGANIZATIONS & STAFF

The relationships developed between participants and program staff were another defining feature of Women First programs. Coordinators and facilitators widely recognized that *"if [learners] don't feel engaged or like we want them to be there and are welcome to be there"* (CFBC staff), then their participation would likely suffer. As a result, program delivery staff were active and intentional in nurturing respectful and supportive relationships with learners. Evaluation findings validated the importance of these efforts: most participants reported that staff delivering their programs created safe spaces for them to express themselves (91%) and talk about structural issues (e.g., racism, housing crisis) (89%), respected them and their background (90%), and believed they could achieve their goals (87%) (see Figure 1). Relatedly, participants were significantly less likely to identify a lack of role models/mentors as a barrier at follow-up than at baseline (p<0.01, n=42).

Figure 1 Participants' perspectives on program staff
Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

Staff in the program...

Create a safe space for me to express who I am and who I want to be

3%
6%
91%
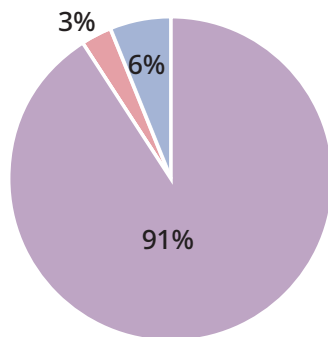
Acknowledge and respect who I am and my background

4%
6%
90%
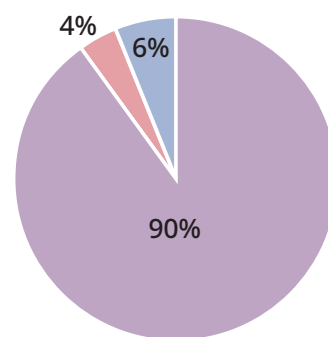
Create a safe space to talk about inequities, discrimination, or prejudice

4%
7%
89%
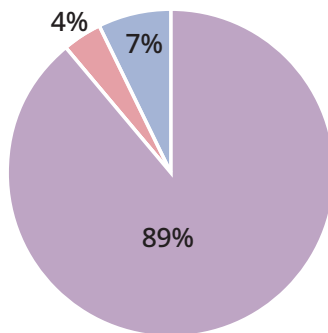
Believe I am capable of achieving my goals, regardless of my background

6%
7%
87%
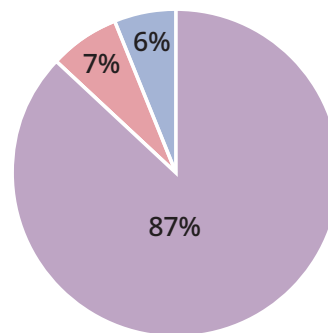
| ■ 'Agree' or 'strongly agree' | ■ 'Neither agree nor disagree' | ■ 'Disagree' or 'strongly disagree' |

Learners across all sites described a strong connection with program staff, perceiving a genuine investment in their well-being and lives. Accounts like the following highlight the profound effects this had on learners:

"There was an instance where we had a really heavy talk. The facilitator looked around at the end of the day and she's like, 'I understand that this was a very heavy subject and you all handled it very well, but I know some of you might be just really good at masking. If that's the case, don't be afraid to come to me.' That was the moment when I was like, 'wow, this place really does care.'" (SJLE participant)

**I think women definitely face a lot more barriers than people might realize or expect. We often put ourselves on the backburner, so to be able to offer an opportunity for [learners] to be in a group of like-minded women in a safe space... It is not only helping them to get the confidence to go into the workforce if that's where they choose to go, but just to have something for them, and somewhere to go to take care of themselves.** (Futureworx staff)

Untitled
(Kelsey Hanrahan, SJLE learner)

From checking in after a difficult day to helping a participant relocate midway through the program, program delivery staff made learners feel seen, welcomed, and cared for, with powerful effects. What's more, partners often went the extra mile to create safe and welcoming physical learning environments for participants, providing coffee and snacks, warm and thoughtful decor, and dedicated spaces (e.g., for in-class instruction, wellness/mental health room). This approach took on added significance given the gendered, racial, and socioeconomic disparities prevalent in the distribution of care work.[6] For many learners, receiving care was a novel experience; to do so in an environment where this was actively promoted and celebrated was truly ground-breaking.

"The facilitator was my biggest support before, during, and after the program. Her being able to save a place for me and know which program would work best for me was a huge support. After the program, she helped me find other avenues to go to so that I can continue on my path."

By weaving their authentic selves and lived experiences into their roles, many program staff developed relationships with participants grounded in vulnerability, humility, and mutual respect, moving away from more traditional or hierarchical teacher-student dynamics. This was in part illustrated through partners' commitment to building staff teams that better reflected the learners being served, further contributing to environments where participants felt seen, heard, and valued. As one program facilitator described, *"being a woman who identifies as having some of the same barriers to employment as some of the women we work with, I was like, 'I feel I could be very relatable.'"* (Futureworx staff). While shared identity alone cannot guarantee positive program outcomes, many learners did speak to the significance of having facilitators with similar experiences of womanhood, poverty, queerness, neurodivergence, Indigeneity, or immigration to Canada, among others.

One participant aptly captured this sentiment:

> *"The [facilitators] had experience being in our position, which is great. I felt like they were teaching us things that they learned as well, rather than someone who didn't know our situations and is teaching us to do things without knowing what you have to go through to get there."* (Futureworx participant)

Together, the evaluation findings suggest that positive outcomes from Women First programs were intimately connected to the supportive, respectful, and caring bonds forged between learners and staff. Such relationships fostered a sense of safety and belonging for learners, making them feel welcome and included in programs. They also contributed to a stronger sense of accountability among participants: beyond knowing that staff would notice their absence from or lack of engagement in class, many recognized and wanted to honour the dedication of program instructors. In the words of one learner, *"I found the support of the staff most meaningful. They were nothing but kind, caring, encouraging, positive: they wanted us to succeed. They helped me succeed in this program. I always wanted to show up"* (MBTI participant). These relationships also played a vital role in the effective administration of wraparound supports offered through the project. A foundation of mutual respect and trust was key to enabling learners to disclose needs to staff more comfortably and with less stigma or shame, transforming charitable interactions into those of more dignified, consensual support.

Reinforcing this, staff and learners recognized this deliberate approach as pivotal in enhancing participant self-esteem. This was demonstrated by the substantial increase in self-esteem levels reported during the program, with those rating their self-esteem as high (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale), rising from 34% at the outset to 51% upon program completion (n=99-102). One participant recounted their program's role in helping rebuild their sense of self, along with the knock-on effects of this:

> *"I came to the program feeling very low in my self-value, and overwhelmed by the prospect of finding a job. I am educated and possess many of the relevant skills to find work, yet every rejection was a blow to my self-esteem...I needed help and support to make it out of the depression I was feeling. Learning and exploring my values, core desired feelings, and other salient topics gave me the opportunity to examine my inner process of self-care and systems of support. Sometimes as women, we put ourselves last, never considering the damage that is being done to our overall feeling of worth. The program provided me with the space to examine and deal with those issues that were eroding my confidence and making it difficult for me to be my best self."* (Participant survey response)

Worldwide inclusion
(Heather Thompson, Futureworx learner)

"This photo is of Cape Chignecto during the start of spring, on a beautiful evening. Isle Haute is in the background. Even though the island is not included in the land, it is included in the photo and it completes it. It is okay to be different and to remember that we aren't perfect. As a visible minority I felt not involved growing up. This program made me feel like I belonged."

At the same time, this approach was not without its challenges. While partners and learners emphasized the importance and value of a relational approach to employment and skills training, they also acknowledged the time and emotional energy this demanded of program staff, who were mostly women themselves. One staff member articulated this tension, highlighting the importance of prioritizing service providers' well-being alongside that of learners:

💬 *"This is a job that I always bring home. I check in with [learners] if I haven't seen them for a few days. I can never shut off. I'm very burnt out, but I love the work I do. You grow to care so much about them. These women are so much more than what they've been through."* (SGEI staff)

Maintaining staff-learner relationships and the effects thereof is another challenge highlighted by the evaluation. For instance, participants' gains in self-esteem were not sustained at follow-up, suggesting the importance of ongoing access to safe, supportive environments for women after programs' conclusion.

"I need to be engaged":
COMMUNITY & CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Recognizing the diverse meanings of "community" for participants (e.g., biological or chosen families, town or city, faith-based, nation), programs differed in their approaches to community engagement and belonging. Despite these differences, a stronger sense of connection to their respective communities emerged as a consistent finding among Women First participants.

Partners sought to bridge the gap between participants and their communities in a variety of ways. Learners in one of SJLE's cohorts engaged in volunteer initiatives throughout their program, while both Futureworx and SGEI welcomed women from the community to share their knowledge and experiences with learners as guest speakers or mentors. Several partners invited representatives from other local service delivery organizations to help familiarize learners with additional resources available to them. This approach underlines partners' aim of strengthening the ties between learners and their wider communities, with the hopes that these connections could continue to flourish post-program.

The evaluation findings strongly corroborate these efforts: in the post-program survey, participants overwhelmingly reported that they were more aware of community resources (83%) and that program staff had already connected them with other helpful services (86%) (see Figure 2).

Soup for the troupe
(Rhonda DeCoff, Futureworx learner)

"This photo is of soup from Soup Fest. Restaurants entered a soup competition. The community got to vote for their favourite. It was more than just soup. I came away from the experience so engaged, nourished and included. Something so simple brings so many people together, fostering communication and opportunity. It created an atmosphere of contentment and happiness: who can be angry over a bowl of soup?

People are happier and healthier when they are engaged in their community. Anything can be used as a catalyst for engagement, it just happened to be soup for me."

"Strength in numbers"

The vast majority also agreed that they knew where to access help in the future (81%), or in many cases already had plans to access further support (89%). In the words of one participant, the most valuable aspect of the program was learning about *"what's available to support someone like me. I felt so hopeless and stuck before but now I feel hopeful and like I can move around again"* (Participant survey response).

Figure 2 Participants' connections to post-program resources
Source: Post-program survey (n=114)

If I need support in the future, I feel comfortable reaching out to program staff

10%

90%

I plan to access supports or resources in the future, from my program or others

11%

89%

Program staff connected me with other services or resources that have helped me

14%

86%

I know more about the services and resources available to me in my community

17%

83%

Thanks to this program, I know where to access help if I need it moving forward

19%

81%

■ 'Strongly agree' or 'agree'   ■ 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree'

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Building on this foundation, the three partners whose programs exclusively served Indigenous women (CFBC, MBTI, SGEI) made intentional efforts to incorporate cultural knowledge and activities into their programming. For instance, SGEI enriched their programs through language classes and workshops on beading, drum making, and ribbon skirts. Furthermore, staff at these organizations described drawing on the Medicine Wheel, Seven Teachings, or other holistic, Indigenous-informed frameworks to guide both delivery and content. These culturally-rooted approaches had a profound impact on Indigenous participants, exemplified by one SGEI learner's reflections on learning Anishinaabemowin:

> *"Learning my language...that was my safe place, my happy place. The teacher was really good. I used to be scared to learn it...It was the first time I ever felt safe to try speaking it. I really liked that part. I never thought I'd be able to feel safe doing that."* (SGEI participant)

Such testimonies highlight the powerful role of Indigenous-focused programming, not only in fostering a sense of safety and well-being, but also in supporting Indigenous participants to establish, explore, or grow their cultural identity and connections.

More generally, the Women First project saw learners develop a stronger sense of connection and belonging to their respective communities. The proportion of participants reporting a strong (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) sense of community belonging increased by 24 percentage points, from 43% at baseline to 67% post-program. A similar trend emerged regarding participants' access to a range of social supports, including help with housework, emotional support, or job/career advice. Just under 40% of participants reported being easily able to access these supports (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) at baseline, compared to 70% post-program (see Figure 3). Moreover, although a higher number of self-reported barriers did predict lower levels of community belonging and access to social support at baseline (r^2=.16, F(1,123)=23.16, p<.000), these factors had no significant effect on changes from baseline to post-program (r^2=.40, F(2,92)=30.20, p=.368; r^2=.40, F(2,93)=30.60, p=.052). This speaks to programs' ability to foster belonging and connection among learners despite the substantial barriers many were facing outside of the classroom. However, while Women First participants reported enhanced community belonging from baseline to post-program, these gains were not sustained at follow-up. As with other findings highlighted in this brief, this speaks to the difficulty of sustaining relational outcomes after the formal conclusion of training.

Figure 3 Participants reporting strong (i.e., at least 3 on a 5-point scale) belonging and social support at pre- and post-program
Source: Baseline & post-program surveys (n=99-102)

Community belonging

43% (Baseline), 67% (Post-program)

Access to social support

38% (Baseline), 70% (Post-program)

Baseline   Post-program
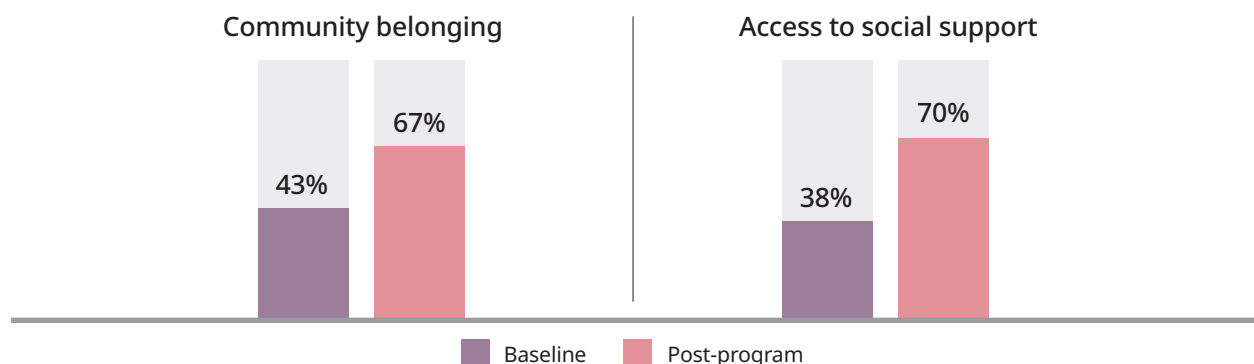
Key takeaways

The Women First project offers rich insights into the importance and implications of cultivating training environments that centre relationships, compassion, and care. While doing so demands considerable resources, time, and energy from staff and organizations delivering programs, partners insisted that these additional efforts were not only worthwhile, but necessary. This perspective is substantiated by the evaluation findings, which highlight the immense value and impact of employment and skills training that creates space for learners to develop meaningful connections with each other, program staff, and the communities of which they are a part.

Discussions with partners revealed that while many suspected their programs made positive differences in learners' relationships and sense of belonging, it had been challenging to demonstrate this compellingly in the past, including for funders. While the outcomes explored in this brief are rarely prioritized in the context of employment and training programs, evaluation findings from the Women First project illustrate the tremendous value of providing a safe, relationship-focused space for learners. The sense of inclusion, belonging, and community offered by programs established a robust foundation for learners to engage more intentionally with the training content, supported by the motivation and accountability of their peers and facilitators. Ultimately, programs fulfilled not only training needs, but social and emotional ones as well – and, according to partners and learners alike, were stronger for it.

When viewed through a feminist lens, the labour contributing to these outcomes aligns with the concept of care as "the energy and time we spend in intention to contribute to others' well-being, vitality, and lives" (p. 9).[7] By redefining the intentional, reciprocal relationships formed among learners, partner staff, and wider communities as acts of care, we highlight the necessity of making such efforts visible and valued. This perspective shifts the focus from one exclusively on skill acquisition to a holistic approach where nurturing relationships and emotional well-being are integral to the learning experience.

Grounding and flourishing through the women's program
(Maria Anwer, PTP staff)

"We did an outing with our cohort to a garden. When I look at those ladies, they represent our program. The day began with our trip to the beautiful conservatory where women experienced serene and tranquil surroundings of nature. They explored the lush gardens and learned about the importance of conserving the environment. The surroundings allowed participants to meet each other on an informal level and make connections. Yes, they need the skills we teach them, but also the grounding: the confidence, the social environment we give them, I think that is the biggest contribution."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Holistic and comprehensive programs

Value, prioritize, and adequately resource employment and training programs that integrate skills development with learners' emotional and social well-being. Such an approach requires funders to recognize and value a wider range of program outcomes and allocate resources accordingly. In turn, delivery organizations should ensure practitioners have sufficient time and budget to address the full spectrum of learners' needs, including those related to social connection and belonging.

2 Representative, diverse, and supported staffing

Strive to have program staff reflect the diversity of learners to foster relatability and understanding. In addition, equip practitioners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to facilitate relational program environments while protecting their own well-being (e.g., wages and benefits that reflect this labour, sufficient time and flexibility in program schedules, access to relevant professional development opportunities).

3 In-program connection and engagement

Design programs to foster trusting and respectful relationships among learners and staff. Potential strategies include implementing supportive program protocols or mechanisms (e.g., for conflict resolution, developing community norms), creating opportunities for learners to connect with one other through shared experiences, and integrating activities that seek to strengthen learners' connections with one another, program facilitators, and geographical, cultural, or other communities.

4 Post-program connection and engagement

Consider strategies to sustain social and emotional gains beyond the end of programs. This could take multiple forms, including alumni networks or events, mentorship programs, or online or other fora for ongoing peer support between learners. In the long term, there is a need for governments to consider and address the broader structural factors that contribute to loneliness and isolation for multiply-marginalized individuals (e.g., economic precarity, exclusion associated with sexism/racism/ableism).

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