"Everyone's success looks different"

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO LEARNER REALITIES IN WOMEN FIRST

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ptp Adult Learning and
Employment Programs

"Everyone's success looks different": Understanding and responding to learner realities in Women First

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

Feminist approaches to research and evaluation ask us to attend carefully to context, asking that we "investigat[e] and describ[e] relevant social, cultural, economic, power, and identity issues… recognizing that such questions may bring to light previously unseen conditions or dynamics that affect the program's (or participants') outcomes or possibilities" (p. 24).[3] This brief provides an overview of the broader context of the Women First project, as well as the conditions and dynamics informing the implementation of participating programs. This includes further details about service delivery partner organizations and their program offerings, as well as a more intricate portrait of the women who took part. Together, these inform a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the evaluation findings, including both the experiences and outcomes of learners.

Women First partners: A closer look

PARTNER & PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Women First project sought to leverage service delivery partners' knowledge and expertise through adaptations to their existing program models. Through their participation in the project, all six partner sites had access to 1) a new Skills for Success curriculum focused on adaptability and collaboration and 2) funding to deliver enhanced wraparound supports for learners.

Rather than designing new programs from the ground up, the strength of the project was in supporting partners to sustain, reflect on, and enhance the work they were already doing, supported by responsive and collaborative evaluation and opportunities for collective learning. While partners tested new approaches to their unique programs, the project also represented an opportunity for partners to generate evidence about the broader function and value of sustained, inclusive, and accessible programming to meaningfully support those furthest from the labour market.

More details about the unique features and aims of each Women First partner and project are available in the full evaluation report. For the purposes of this brief, partners' program offerings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of participating Women First programs

Partner	Location(s)	Key program elements
CFBC	Blueberry River First Nations, BC Kamloops, BC Surrey, BC (virtual)	• Drone operator training • Road-mapping and goal identification exercises • Skills-building and cultural workshops (e.g., computer skills, financial literacy, guest speakers) • Support completing education (e.g., GED) or obtaining relevant certificates/documentation (e.g., driver's license, safety certificates) • Support finding future job placements or work opportunities • Engagement with employers in relevant industries (e.g., construction)
Futureworx	Truro, NS	• Skills development and assessment using the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) • Community-based activities (e.g., workshops by community partners, mentorship program, participation in community events) • Training and certifications (e.g., Diversity in the Workplace, Food Safety, Mental Health First Aid) • Two-week job shadowing/work placement component
MBTI	Winnipeg, MB Sagkeeng First Nation, MB	• Work readiness training focused on Essential Skills and employability • Introductory trades training • Safety training and certification (e.g., WHMIS, Working at Heights) • Cultural education and mentorship, including access to Elders • Support connecting with trades unions and employers • Application of learning through hands-on construction project (i.e., sheds)

Partner	Location(s)	Key program elements
PTP	Toronto, ON	• Curriculum, activities, and workshops focused on self-awareness, managing stress and emotions, relationship skills, and problem-solving • Employment counselling • Self-care and mental health activities, including access to a social worker • Focus on "next steps" following program completion (e.g., goal-setting, connection to other referrals or resources, seeking future funding)
SGEI	Fort Frances, ON Sioux Lookout, ON	• Wellness programming (e.g., yoga, meditation, art therapy, counselling) • Cultural and arts-based programming, including language and land-based learning as well as traditional crafts (e.g., moccasins, hand drums, ribbon skirts, medicine bags) • Career and skills exploration (e.g., woodworking, cooking) • Support in completing education (e.g., GED) or obtaining relevant certificates/documentation (e.g., driver's license, safety certificates) • Job application support (e.g., resume-writing, interviewing)
SJLE*	Saint John, NB	• Social emotional skills training • One-on-one coaching focused on goal-setting and barriers • Referrals to/connections with other resources and SJLE programs • Classroom modules (e.g., working with others, navigating challenges) – *Power Up* • Community volunteer projects – *Power Up* • On-the-job coaching – *Social enterprises*

*Two SJLE programs/initiatives participated in Women First: 1) Power Up (a 10-week leadership program) and 2) two social enterprises employing SJLE learners.

APPROACHES TO SERVICE DELIVERY

While several partners noted that women had historically been overrepresented in their other programs, the Women First project represented most partners' first committed effort to delivering programs specifically targeted to women or with a dedicated gender lens. In this way, the project offered partners a valuable opportunity to grow their knowledge, capacity, and skills when it came to serving multiply-marginalized women, both during the project and in the future. To quote one partner staff, *"we wanted to strive to reach racialized and marginalized women [through Women First]. It's been a challenge that we've experienced for many years, is how to mobilize clients from those communities"* (Futureworx staff).

In response to a diverse population of learners with unique needs and backgrounds, partners made several thoughtful adaptations to their Women First programs. One key consideration was the selection of Women First staff and program facilitators. Partners sought to fill roles with new

and existing team members who were well-suited to build trusting and respectful relationships with participating women. This involved pursuing a diverse staff team that more accurately reflected the learner population. In some cases, this meant an all-woman team for program delivery. More often, it involved staffing programs with individuals whose diverse identities (e.g., gender, Indigeneity, disability) or community connections echoed those of the participants.

Partners also considered ways to ensure their program approaches were responsive to the learners they anticipated serving. A common thread across all partners was their focus on delivering programs underpinned by safety, empowerment, and meeting women where they were at in their journeys. In practice, this took multiple forms, including offering programs in warm, comfortable, and private locations; involving guest speakers and community partners with shared backgrounds and experiences as learners; and engaging facilitators, social workers, and Elders knowledgeable in trauma- and violence-informed approaches in program delivery, among other strategies.

"Safety was number one, and not just physical safety. [It was about] that comfort of feeling like you're in an environment where you're not going to be judged. You're going to be supported. You're going to have that understanding that I think all of us women can relate to, where we feel that people in the workplace don't understand us because they don't have that experience of being a woman or maybe they don't have women in their lives that they're very close to...A woman's story can be very broad. It's not all about being a female and childbirth or having a monthly menstrual. There's so much more...The environment that a women-specific program creates is a level of safety and comfort that really allows women [in the program] to strive to do better."
(Futureworx staff)

What was I thinking!
(PTP staff)

"This photo was taken when I was tree-top trekking with my grandson. This photo is a reminder of what it took to face my fears, to take on a challenge that involved strength and balance, finding out it was much harder than I thought it would be, but pushing through and learning something about myself through the experience. I didn't finish the entire trek. It got too high and too difficult. I got off and found my way down with support. And it was okay. I still felt proud of myself.

Why this photo? For me, it's a reminder of what it takes for [learners] to face fears, take risks, challenge themselves, and move forward on a pathway where they may not feel grounded or safe, and how we as service delivery providers provide the safe space, the training – a way on to a path forward and a way off, if needed – without judgement. [It's about] how we measure or determine success, and how doing your best – and maybe not finishing – can still be framed positively."

While partners pursued diverse approaches to working with and supporting multiply-marginalized women, several common practices, values, and features underpinned their collective approach to delivery and implementation. These included:

- Adopting a **learner-centred approach**, characterized by meeting learners 'where they're at' and prioritizing trust and relationship-building in programs

- Incorporating **cultural safety and relevance**, particularly with consideration to Indigenous learners

- Pursuing a **strengths-based orientation** to program delivery, supporting learners to recognize and gain confidence in their existing skills while developing new ones

- Focusing on **social emotional skills** within training to support positive employment and other (e.g., health, social) outcomes

- Embracing an **expansive understanding of desired program outcomes**, including definitions of learner 'success' that are not limited to post-program employment

- Cultivating close **relationships with local resources and service providers** to facilitate learners' access to wraparound supports (e.g., through referrals to external supports, partnering to offer a specific service)

- Building opportunities for **work-integrated learning** within programs

- Incorporating **learner assessment/ reflection and evaluation** into programming

Partners similarly described common challenges or constraints in designing and delivering their programs, including in the context of Women First. In particular, they highlighted programs' limited capacity to address the root causes of many of the structural inequities affecting learners, constrained access to long-term and flexible funding opportunities, and the absence or inaccessibility of appropriate wraparound services as barriers to effective and equitable program delivery.

A common thread across all partners was their focus on delivering programs underpinned by safety, empowerment, and meeting women where they were at in their journeys.
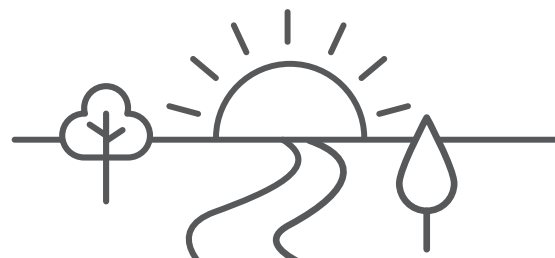
Women First learners: A closer look

LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS

In total, 156 participants took part in the Women First project and corresponding evaluation (see Table 2). The vast majority (96%) of Women First participants identified as women. This is perhaps unsurprising given that programs were advertised as being for women and funded through ESDC's Women's Employment Readiness Pilot. In practice, Women First programs welcomed both cisgender and transgender women, as well as non-binary and gender-diverse individuals who applied with knowledge of the programs' gendered emphasis. In a few cases, program staff and learners expressed uncertainty about whether gender-diverse individuals were eligible for programs, as well as how best to support learners who were not cisgender women. This points to the importance of clear messaging from funders and service delivery organizations about who is eligible to participate in funded programs, as well as capacity-building within the sector to better support 2SLGBTQ+ - and particularly gender minority – individuals in employment and skills training programs.

Table 2 Participants per site
Source: Administrative data

Organization	Number of cohorts	Number of participants
CFBC	3	17
Futureworx	2	24
MBTI	2	28
PTP	2	24
SGEI	3	31
SJLE	N/A (continuous intake)	31

Beyond the (mostly) shared experience of womanhood, participants brought a rich diversity of experiences, expectations, needs, and strengths to Women First programs. Of the participants who shared demographic information, about half indicated that they were Indigenous (53%) or had a disability (49%). Nearly one-third identified as racialized (31%), while over one-fifth were 2SLGBTQ+ (23%) or an immigrant/newcomer to Canada (21%). In other words, Indigenous, disabled, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ participants were disproportionately represented in Women First programs compared to the national average (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Comparing participant & national demographics
Source: Baseline survey (n=58-120)

	Women First programs	Canada-wide
Indigenous	53%	5%[4]
Disabled/living with a disability	49%	27%[5]
Racialized	31%	26.5%[6]
2SLGBTQ+	23%	4%[7]
Immigrant/newcomer	21%	23%[8]
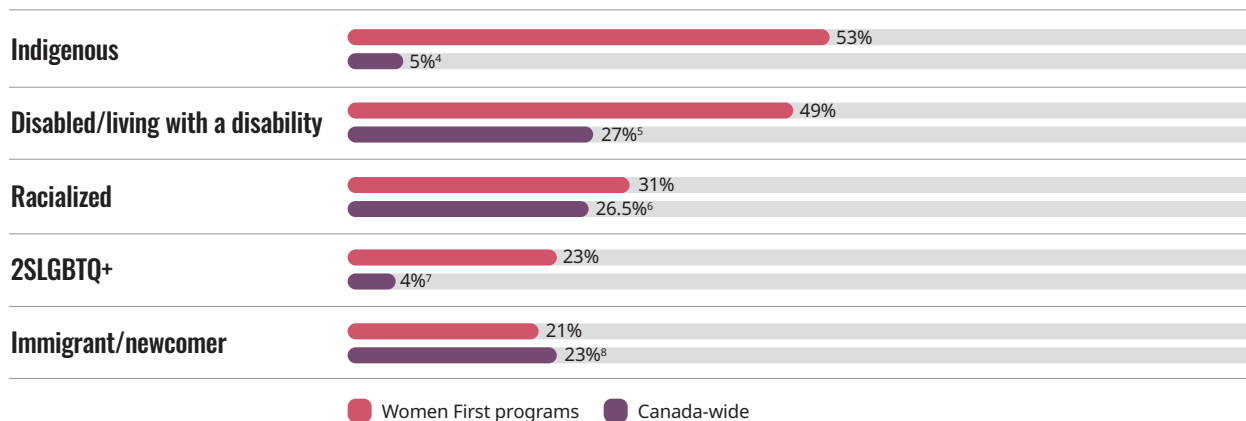
Given the nature of where programs were located and who they historically served, sites varied in terms of program audience and design. For example, MBTI, CFBC, and SGEI offered programs exclusively for Indigenous women and integrated more cultural components into their programming in response; meanwhile, PTP served the highest proportion of newcomer women among Women First programs, likely due to its Toronto location. In addition to the diversity of participants across programs, there was also diversity across cohorts within the same program.

One in five participants (20%) identified that they were in education or training immediately prior to their program, with the same proportion reporting that they were employed. In terms of educational attainment, more than two-thirds of participants had a high school diploma (45%) or less (26%), with 16% and 8% holding a college/trade school diploma or university degree, respectively (n=119). While Women First programs attracted participants of a range of ages, the majority (63%) of learners were between 25 and 44 years old (n=119).

FACTORS SHAPING PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

Women First participants and staff spoke persuasively to how a wide range of factors shaped learners' lives before, during, and after programs. This had implications for their sense of community and belonging, access to formal and informal resources, distinct challenges or barriers, and goals during and after the program.

Untitled
(Jamie Lee Gehue, Futureworx learner)

"It is the arbor in my community where our mawiomis are held. I feel it is a powerful place for my people. We dance, pray, socialize, and heal while we are there. It is an indescribable feeling when we are all in our regalia and the drummers are singing.

Mi'kmaq culture is powerful, beautiful, and respectful. We have been through so much and still manage to thrive. Even though others wanted to eradicate us, we are still here, practicing and exercising our rights and traditions. I am resilient and continuing my healing journey as a Mi'kmaq woman. I am breaking cycles and trying to be better as a mom and community member."

> **Some of us are single moms. Some of us come from other communities, so having travel and a place to stay is huge. There's the fear of going into these classroom settings - 'are they going to be nice to us? What is going to be expected of us? Are the instructors going to be caring, kind or harsh, mean, cruel?' It's things like that that we all face. Some of us face lifestyle barriers. Some of us are homeless or in abusive relationships. Some of us don't drive, so getting here is hard. Some of us have never left the reserve before. Some of us are dealing with substance abuse or alcohol abuse.** (MBTI participant)

Learner Spotlight   "Rebuilding my life again"

This spotlight illustrates one participant's journey prior to Women First, navigating mental health struggles, job loss, and isolation, among other challenges. As she explained:

"I have had issues with mental health and addiction over the years, and I was just coming through one of them...I left an abusive relationship and had been living in a transition house and was just starting out on my own, rebuilding my life again...Life out there as an adult woman when you are on your own is very isolating."

Eventually, she moved from transitional housing into an apartment building. In exchange for a discount on rent, she served as a building ambassador and did some cleaning work for the building. The improved housing situation – combined with a new job in the hospitality industry – gave her a sense of renewed confidence. However, she was laid off from this role shortly before joining the Women First program:

"I had a job and I was giving it my best, and I felt really good because I had the job. But then I lost the job because apparently there weren't enough hours...It really took a big chunk out of my self-esteem."

When asked if she had previously accessed or considered seeking support from provincial social assistance programs, she shared that:

"I really don't want to. I've had terrible experiences going there. I hate how they make me feel...If I don't have to go there, I won't. They really don't help a person get ahead – not from my experience anyways. Of all the years that I've had to go there, I've had one employment worker that offered to do something for me to help. She offered to buy me a new pair of shoes. Apparently, you can get new shoes through there, but nobody over all the years had ever offered me something like that. And I cried."

Upon seeing an advertisement for the Women First program in her area, she knew she had to apply:

"The night that I got let go, I saw on my Facebook newsfeed the ad for this program. I was probably one of the first people that messaged them, and I kept calling them and texting them."

She knew that the program had come at the right time: she was eager to continue "rebuilding [her] life again."

To begin, **socio-demographic data** indicate that Women First learners were from populations experiencing historical, ongoing, and systemic marginalization linked to sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, Indigeneity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and so forth. Learners' social locations were typically at the intersection of multiple systems of power or oppression (e.g., racism, ableism, poverty), compounding some of the challenges identified here.

Baseline survey data speak to this further, with over 40% of respondents reporting **discrimination or bias** in the hiring process as a barrier to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment. Participants also identified discrimination, prejudice, or bias based on particular identities or characteristics, offering additional context for this finding. For instance, nearly 70% of disabled respondents perceived discrimination, prejudice, or bias based on disability, health, or illness as a barrier in their employment journeys. Similar trends emerged for discrimination based on nationality or race, with 67% and 65% of newcomer and racialized respondents reporting this as a barrier, respectively.

Overall, Women First learners had lower levels of formal **educational attainment** than the national average. While Canada's national high school completion rate for women aged 25-64 is nearly 90%, over a quarter of Women First learners reported not having finished high school.[9] For some, obtaining their high school diploma or equivalent (i.e., GED) was a goal they had been working towards for years. However, many women lacked the time, money, and other resources to complete or pursue further education. Some saw this as having direct implications for their employment prospects:

Over **40%** of respondents reported discrimination or bias in the hiring process as a barrier to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment.

> *"My disadvantage is, where are you finding a job with a high school education? It's not that I'm not capable: I've had many positions where I grew into good positions. But when you put that on a piece of paper, no one cares in this day and age, and I don't have the money to go to school."*
(PTP participant)

Income insecurity was also a widespread challenge among Women First learners, with many describing long-term and severe experiences of poverty. Over half reported worrying about having enough money to meet basic needs 'often' or 'always', with 90% of participants worrying about this at least some of the time (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Financial stress: How often do participants worry about having enough money to meet basic needs?
Source: Baseline survey (n=120)

- 33% Often
- 29% Sometimes
- 28% Always
- 8% Rarely
- 3% Never

Legend: Always · Often · Sometimes · Rarely · Never
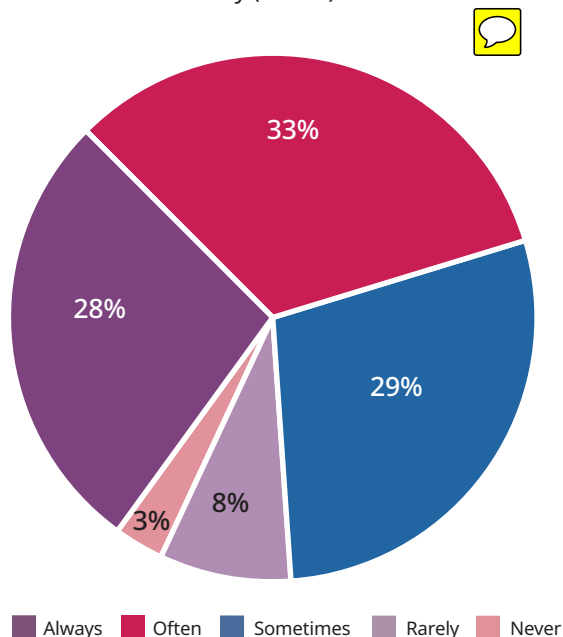
Learners and partners attributed this to several factors, including the **high cost of living, low wages,** and **inadequate provincial social or income assistance rates**. One partner emphasized the disparity between the minimum and living wage in their community, stating that *"our minimum wage [in Nova Scotia] does not meet a living wage by probably six dollars per hour. When you hear statistics that people cannot afford to work, that is real"* (Futureworx staff). Indeed, the living wage for each community represented in Women First far exceeded the hourly minimum wage set by the province (see Table 3).

The provincial social or income assistance programs on which many women relied also tended to be inadequate to cover even their basic needs, a finding that is consistent with other research in this area.[13,14] Beyond issues of adequacy, almost one-third (29%) of baseline survey respondents identified rules related to other income sources (e.g., social/income assistance clawbacks) as a barrier to finding, maintaining, or advancing in employment (n=130).

The **COVID-19 pandemic** also had detrimental impacts on some participants' financial situations. One participant spoke to their experience with job loss due to the pandemic, and the resulting hardship of this:

Table 3 Living and minimum wage amounts in Women First areas (January 2023)

Partner	Living wage[10, 11]	Minimum wage[12]
CFBC	$20.64 (Dawson Creek) $20.91 (Kamloops)	$15.65
Futureworx	$24.30	$13.60
MBTI	$19.21	$13.50
PTP	$25.05	$15.50
SGEI	$19.80	$15.50
SJLE	$23.35	$13.75

💬 *"During COVID, I lost both of my jobs. I worked in the fitness industry managing a gym and I also did sales...I was on furlough, but I never ended up going back because they said they were closing that place, so my job didn't exist anymore. It was really hard for me because I had been a really hardworking person. I had two to three jobs at certain points in my life because of the lifestyle I wanted, traveling and taking care of myself, all that. Everything happened very fast. I went into a pretty bad depression. It was really difficult for me to deal with it...Months went on and then I got into a really bad position where I couldn't afford to do this anymore. I had no money left and I went on Ontario Works because I was like, 'you know what? At this point, I've paid into it my whole life. I've always had a job. I have to just do this.'"* (PTP participant)

These factors also affected participants' **housing** situations. Learners underscored the importance of safe, stable, and affordable housing in achieving their goals, both within and outside of programs:

💬 *"It starts with housing, because if you don't have a safe place to live, then you can't necessarily build on that...If you need to come to the Learning Exchange because you need to work on your high school diploma to better yourself or you want to go to college to further your education – if you don't have a home base, everything else is hard. If you don't have financial stability to sustain your home base, then it doesn't work either."* (SJLE participant)

While most learners reported living in relatively stable housing, nearly a quarter (22%) reported more precarious situations (e.g., couch surfing, emergency shelter) at the beginning of their programs. Just half of baseline survey respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their housing at that time (n=79). 45% reported that housing-related challenges (e.g., access to affordable housing, housing insecurity) had been a barrier in their employment journeys (n=132). In interviews, several women elaborated on their past and ongoing challenges with unsafe, inappropriate, or unaffordable housing: *"Kamloops is so expensive...[Living with family] is only temporary until I'm done this course...I still consider myself homeless because I don't have a home. That's been really, really difficult for me"* (CFBC participant).

Research also shows the relationship between poverty, mental health, and employment, whereby "stressful living conditions associated with poverty...increase the likelihood of mental health disorders and career disengagement" (p. 374).[15] This was echoed in the evaluation findings, with participants reporting multiple sources and high frequencies of **stress** upon joining Women First programs, in addition to widespread mental health struggles (see Figure 3).
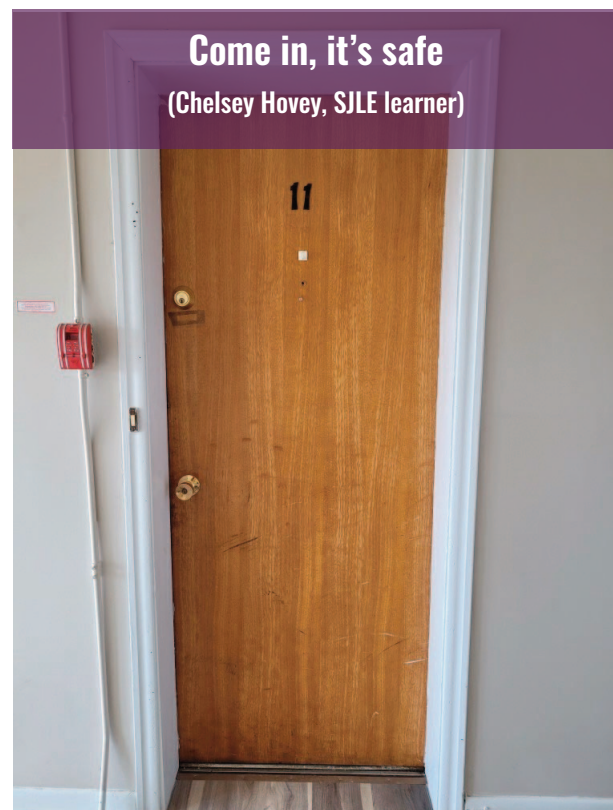
Come in, it's safe
(Chelsey Hovey, SJLE learner)

"This is the front door of my apartment. My home is very important to me. It is my sanctuary. Full-time employment does not equate to stability in shelter. If not for this program's help, I would have been homeless with an excellent job. I value having a home where I don't have to worry about eviction. I'm quiet about the struggles I still have. Silence does not mean I'm living 'the dream.'"

Figure 3 Self-reported stress: How stressful are most days according to participants?
Source: Baseline survey (n=128)

- Not at all or not very stressful — 13%
- A bit stressful — 49%
- Quite a bit or extremely stressful — 38%
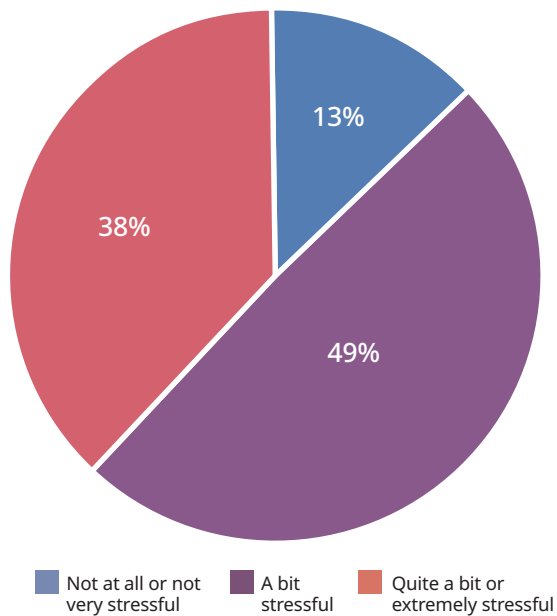
Participants and staff also spoke to the role of **trauma** in the lives of Women First learners, including intergenerational trauma (e.g., colonial violence and the lasting impact of residential schools), environmental trauma (e.g., displacement and other consequences from wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and other climate-related events), or trauma arising from gender-based, intimate partner, or community violence. In interviews, staff from various sites elaborated on how these and other forms of trauma manifested among participants, as well as the actual or potential implications for programming:

"[The examples in the curriculum] also unpacked a lot of trauma that came up...[Participants were] coming up with all the reasons why this person [in the example] might have anxiety about leaving their child at daycare. Historically, [Indigenous] children have been taken away at daycare, and it was probably renamed 'residential school' and it wasn't a safe place...It helped opened my eyes to the reality of Indigenous people coming in to utilize things that might always be done in a very, white Eurocentric way." (CFBC staff)

"[Trauma] is coming up daily in some way...For example, we have [a staff member] who is female and [another staff member with the same name] who is male. [We] initially thought the female was going to be the one cleaning the room where we have the program, but it was actually the male. One participant was very triggered and upset about this and having a male in the space [even when we weren't in the classroom]. Now have bins for everyone to put their things in and keep them there." (SGEI staff)

In addition to the personal experiences of Women First learners, **broader community contexts and histories** also shaped the presence of trauma within programs. For example, learners and staff in Blueberry River First Nations - one of CFBC's delivery sites - were required to evacuate the area midway through the program due to the threat of nearby wildfires.[16] Meanwhile, Truro – the community where Futureworx is located – had endured several hardships leading up to the Women First program. In addition to the damage caused by Hurricane Fiona in September 2022, the area has been profoundly affected by the 2020 mass shooting in which a gunman tragically took the lives of 22 people in Colchester, Cumberland, and Hants counties. The subsequent public inquiry cited a "public health emergency" in the province due to unmet mental health needs.[17]

Barriers to accessing mental health supports or services – despite the identified need – were raised repeatedly by Women First learners and staff. This further perpetuated cycles of disadvantage and stress, with one staff member noting, *"there's not a lot of free or subsidized mental health support unless you're in crisis"* (PTP staff). Despite the value of certain existing practices or services (e.g., counselling coverage through social assistance, sliding scale payment options), both participants and staff agreed that these were often insufficient to meet the complex, individualized needs of Women First learners. Many participants reported that even when services were available, long waitlists made them inaccessible. This was particularly true for ongoing or long-term counselling or therapy:

> *"People told me places to go, but all of them have waitlists and you're waiting months, which makes it hard. I've been waiting probably since last year...They do have different counselors when you absolutely need to go talk to them, but sometimes you don't want to get to that point where you're breaking down and bawling before you can go see someone."* (SGEI participant)

All told, the diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences of Women First collectively shaped their experiences before, during, and after their programs in a multitude of ways.

Failure, reborn, flourishing
(Joelle McAuley, MBTI learner)

"Before joining this program, I was a stay at home mom for several years. Recently [my partner and I] separated. I was torn, broken, and not in a good place. Every day was a struggle. I dropped out of my business admin program because I couldn't handle travelling back-and-forth and taking care of four kids. That is a part of my life that shaped me.

I joined the program and figured it [would] help with my personal growth [and] give me experience and skills. I also needed a job that pays. As I navigate my new life with my kids there have been several trial and errors. We are learning to love ourselves [and] let things go, doing what we like, unlearning toxic behaviour, being gentle with ourselves, doing more activities. My goal is to be able to provide my kids with a happy, loving, healthy mom who can provide for them, and this program is giving me the knowledge, skills, and experience to be able to do that...You can rebuild your life from the bricks thrown at you."

Learner Spotlight

"I became so untethered that I couldn't find my centre"

This spotlight documents the experience of one Women First learner who was laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic and, despite high levels of formal education, could not find subsequent employment. Her reflections on job loss, social assistance programs, and the role of confidence are shared below, edited for brevity and readability.

"I was hired during the COVID-19 pandemic and laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was hired in a management position at an NGO, so I worked with an organization that served the Black community. But as usual, these types of organizations come with funding attached, so most times the contract is temporary, so if you lose your funding – that was the end of that position.

Prior to going back to school, I worked for years in the banking industry, so my previous experience was a lot different. This level of unemployment was new, to say the least. As I told my employment service provider, my challenge was not qualifications. My challenge was after going to a school, getting a job, getting laid off...it was such a shock to my confidence. It was causing so much anxiety and stress.

When my employment insurance ended, I went on Ontario Works. I think sometimes when you're working with Ontario Works, you feel like everything is just a pressure to get back to work without understanding what this human is dealing with. What does it take to get them back to work healthy and whole so that they could survive work, right?

The challenge between dealing with that system and the fact that a job was not readily available became such a stressful thing that after a while, I pretty much gave up. I had Ontario Works income, which is not income. So that created a combination of hardship that I've never experienced and led to stress that I've never felt. I felt so frustrated and at the end of my rope, because it wasn't like I wasn't sending out my résumé.

I didn't know what these pandemic years did to me, it just...I became so untethered that I couldn't find my centre. It's like I would get up and try for a minute and then get beaten and then go back and then after a while, I found myself just lying down and refusing to get up.

I didn't necessarily need additional computer courses or something like that. What I needed was a program that helped support me to build back that confidence, to deal with the job search. When I started the program, I never came in here thinking that I'm going to get a job. I was hoping to be able to work on those core pieces that I felt were deflated, defeated, missing, died out, burned out during this pandemic, to be able to energize myself back."

(Re)defining program success

The accounts of those involved in the Women First project highlight the importance of rethinking how we conceptualize program success, especially for multiply-marginalized learners. Traditional, uniform notions of success often fail to capture the diverse and individualized experiences of participants. Instead, findings from Women First underscore the need for expansive, flexible, and personalized definitions of 'successful' or 'positive' outcomes within employment and skills training programs, where success reflects the unique contexts, journeys, wants, and needs of each learner.

While there is often a focus on the struggles and obstacles encountered by the groups represented among Women First learners – a perspective we have also engaged here – learners' participation in and completion of Women First programs is itself a testament to their adaptability, perseverance, and strength. For many Women First participants, achievement in programs was not just about reaching a predetermined endpoint, but about personal growth and development – demonstrated through consistent attendance, learning more about themselves, gaining confidence, feeling empowered, and deepening their connections to their community and culture. For those whose notions of success included securing employment by the end of their program, this achievement was about more than just making ends meet; it reflected women's desire for a stable, well-paying job that aligns with their interests, goals, and experience while supporting their health and well-being.

Women First partners echoed this sentiment, emphasizing their role in providing the space, time, stability, structure, and resources necessary for learners to define and pursue success on their own terms. As one partner summarized, *"it is so important to get to know each individual so that you can see and meet them at their point of success and not just judge everybody based on the same thing"* (Futureworx staff). This approach recognizes the importance of supporting each learner according to their unique needs and goals.

The following quotes from learners and staff further illustrate this approach and its implications in the Women First project:

"[Success] differs for each individual. For some of them, it's just getting them here...We have had many students say they couldn't walk through the door because it brings back memories of when they attended high school...For us, that's a success. They made it in." (SGEI staff)

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"I think just going to [the program], I feel successful already. Because I have signed up to start with, and then I have been going and continuing to attend, and I am going to finish through to the end. Just to say, 'hey, I did it!'... That's huge for me because to me, this is a long-term program - even though it's probably not

considering [the length of] post-secondary or something - But still, to me, this is a long program. To make that commitment, it was a huge step." (CFBC participant)

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"We're trying to help everybody get to a place of success, and that doesn't always look the same for everybody...Not everybody is going to leave this program to start a full-time job on Monday, but that doesn't mean that they were all not successful. Everybody had to meet a different point based on their own lives, their own experiences, and what success looks like for them." (Futureworx staff)

"What I'm working on now since I'm in the program is building a consistent routine so that when I transition from here, I don't fall back into the depression. Just to be able to have routine." (PTP participant)

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"I find the outcomes and successes may not be what the government or funder sees on paper as success. I've seen the women grow so much. That may not be that they got a job, but they've done so much growth which can lead to success in employment eventually. [There are] so many successes that aren't employment-related but are successes in how they move forward in their life in general." (SGEI staff)

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"I'm hoping to be able to leave the program with a better sense of what I want in life and not what other people want for me, because I spent my whole life living my life to make other people happy...I'm done living up to other peoples' expectations...so I'm hoping to learn more about myself and what my expectations for myself are." (SJLE participant)

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"I definitely want to get into a trade and start working. My biggest goal is to get a job – one where I stay employed. Stable employment. Pipe fitters and plumbing has a lot of work that's available in my area, so I can stay close to my kids. There's always a demand for it, so that's great." (MBTI participant)

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"For me, [success is] about confidence and feeling confident. I feel like [the participants] have so many skills that they don't recognize. So that's what I see my job as: there are 11 weeks to help them identify all the skills they do have [and] all the things they can do." (PTP staff)

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"Everything here is individualized, and so everyone's success looks different...it's not just about getting a job. It's about talking to people to work through what's going to work for them...For some people it is a job...There's one woman who came every day and is really struggling with her recovery from addiction and a lot of challenges in her life, and for her to come every day and complete a program is 1,000% success for her." (SJLE staff)

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"I would just feel happy being able to successfully make it through the whole program." (Participant survey response)

Peace
(CFBC learner)

"My vision board shows what I want for myself for the future: being in the forest in a house by the water, growing vegetables and fruits, making time to travel, and to always keep learning. Wanting to be happy and at peace in nature. It's the small things that make a big difference overall."

Key takeaways

All told, the Women First project offers compelling evidence about the importance of attending to the broader context of participants' lives, both in the design and evaluation of employment and skills training programs. The evaluation findings demonstrate that partners operated within a highly complex environment, exemplified both in the broader social and community contexts and in the lives of participating learners. The diverse and intersecting challenges faced by Women First learners – including exposure to structural inequities, systemic oppression, income and housing insecurity, and the profound impact of trauma – collectively shaped their experiences before, during, and after the programs. These factors fundamentally influenced the way programs were designed, delivered, and experienced, adding considerable complexity to partners' work.

Responsive programming for multiply-marginalized women in Women First required more than just targeted recruitment efforts. It necessitated tailoring programs to reflect the diversity and complexity of learners' lives, and ensuring that appropriate supports were available for those coping with poverty, trauma, and so forth. This suggests that to meaningfully support those who stand to benefit the most from employment and training programs, service provider organizations must be equipped with adequate resources to navigate these complexities and adopt an expansive understanding of program success, informed by the experiences and perspectives of the learners themselves. These findings also underscore the critical importance of comprehensive, accessible, and responsive social policies and services in enabling multiply-marginalized women to thrive – in training programs, employment, and the rest of their lives.

Acceptance
(Robin Murphy, Futureworx learner)

"This is a young deer standing in front of my house. To me, it represents a strength and familiarity that the deer has...[and] the strength of the deer to live and survive in the world. It's showing no fear, but it's cautious of the human presence.

Before the program I let my fear, anxiety, and all-around life experiences hold me down and hold me back. The program showed me I was resilient, stronger and smarter than I thought, and to keep on keeping on despite my circumstances."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Tailored and responsive programs

Value, prioritize, and adequately resource pre-employment and training programs that consider and are responsive to the conditions and dynamics in which the programs are provided, as well as the realities that ground participants' lives before and during their participation in programs. 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.

2 Sustainable and flexible funding

Adequately resource service providers to address the complexity of participants' needs. This requires funders to offer sustainable, flexible, and core (i.e., non-project-based) funding. It also calls on funders to provide greater agency to service providers to design and implement programs that reflect their extensive knowledge and expertise of their service delivery context. In turn, this also requires service providers to continue to seek to understand and adapt programs to reflect dynamic learner contexts.
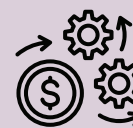
3 Reframe "success"

Programs want to – and with the right support, are well-positioned to – support learners who are most distant from the labour market. However, narrow, rigid ideas about what constitutes program success rarely reflect learner realities or service delivery contexts. Further, when short-term employment outcomes are the primary indicators of program or project success, service providers may be disincentivized from serving learners with greater needs, turning instead to those most likely to demonstrate gains prioritized by funders. Adopting a more expansive understanding of success in programs like Women First would mean valuing a wider diversity of positive program outcomes, including those which might be more feasible and desirable for multiply-marginalized learners. This means viewing pre-employment and training programs as part of a longer reset for those who have a longer journey back to the labour market due to systemic and structural factors.

4 Attend to broader systemic issues

Learners affected by income, housing, or food insecurity will inevitably face challenges in employment and training programs. Addressing these systemic issues requires investments in services and supports that are foundational to women's well-being (e.g., income support, affordable housing, accessible childcare, comprehensive healthcare, public transportation). Rather than responding to symptoms of inadequate systems, this would create the conditions for more effective programs where service providers can feel more assured that learners are coming to them with their basic needs already met.
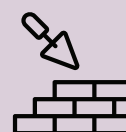
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