Safe Capital: Advancing Survivor Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion in Canada

Eliminating structural barriers for survivors to microloan and lending practices

CANADIAN CENTER FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT | CENTRE CANADIEN POUR L'AUTONOMISATION DES FEMMES

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Content Warning

This report discusses gender-based violence, economic abuse, coercive control, and financial harm. Some content may be difficult for readers, especially those with lived or professional experience in these areas. We encourage readers to engage with this report at their own pace, take care of their well-being, and seek support if needed. To find support in your area, visit here.

Note about gender-inclusive language

CCFWE strives to use gender-inclusive language wherever possible. However, this is not always feasible when engaging with research, data, or programs that are sex- or gender-specific. This report uses "sex" (female) and "gender" (women) as they appear within studies and programs.

Disclaimer

This report is intended for informational purposes only. It does not endorse microloans, loans, or entrepreneurship programs as the right option for every survivor.

CCFWE supports survivors' autonomy, safety, and informed choice in all financial decisions. Microloans are a form of debt and may not always be the safest, most appropriate, or most realistic option for everyone. Taking on new debt can carry additional risks, especially when a survivor is dealing with coerced debt, damaged credit, financial instability, safety concerns, or ongoing control by a partner causing harm.

CCFWE encourages financial institutions, lenders, and entrepreneurship programs to strengthen equitable, transparent, trauma and violence informed practices that promote financial safety, dignity, inclusion, and long term economic security for survivors.

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Women and Gender Equality Canada | Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada | Canada

Land Acknowledgement

CCFWE is located on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation, and we are honoured to be guests on this land. We extend our deepest respect to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, whose past and present contributions continue to shape this country.

As our work focuses on economic abuse and financial exploitation, it is important to recognize that these harms are not new. They are connected to the history and ongoing legacy of colonization in Canada. Efforts to prevent economic abuse must therefore be grounded in justice, accountability, and ongoing work toward reconciliation.

About the Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment

The Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment (CCFWE) is Canada's only nonprofit organization solely dedicated to addressing economic abuse and advancing economic justice. Based in Ottawa, CCFWE works to dismantle the systemic barriers that prevent survivors from accessing economic safety, financial security, and long-term independence.

CCFWE's work is grounded in survivor-informed practice, trauma-informed research, equity, and systems change. The organization works across research, policy, public education, financial empowerment, technology, and community collaboration to help ensure that survivors are not left to navigate financial harm alone.

Through its programs and partnerships, CCFWE supports survivors, service providers, financial institutions, policymakers, employers, and community organizations to better recognize and respond to economic abuse. This includes work on coerced debt, financial exploitation, employment sabotage, access to banking, safe technology, and the policy gaps that keep survivors trapped in unsafe situations.

CCFWE also leads national awareness and advocacy initiatives, including Economic Abuse Awareness Day, survivor-informed research, financial empowerment programs, training for multiple sectors, and tools that help advance economic safety and inclusion. At the heart of this work is a simple belief: economic safety is essential to freedom, dignity, and justice.

Learn more through CCFWE's website www.ccfwe.org

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Executive Summary

For many victims and survivors of economic abuse, entrepreneurship can be more than a way to earn income. It can be a path toward safety, dignity, independence, healing, and long term financial security.

Survivors often rebuild their lives while facing serious financial barriers. These may include coerced debt, damaged credit, employment sabotage, legal costs, housing instability, child care responsibilities, immigration related challenges, limited savings, restricted access to documents, and ongoing financial control or surveillance by a partner causing harm. These challenges are not signs of personal failure. They are often the direct result of abuse, control, and systems that do not fully understand the financial impact of violence.

This report, Safe Capital: Advancing Survivor Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion in Canada, looks at how survivors can be better supported to access safe and appropriate entrepreneurship opportunities. It examines the barriers survivors face when trying to access microloans, business financing, and entrepreneurship support, and it highlights the need for financial systems that are trauma- and violence-informed, fair, flexible, and survivor-centred.

The report is informed by CCFWE's work with survivor entrepreneurs, including five virtual sharing circles with 24 participants, as well as environmental scans of traditional lenders, microloan programs, credit unions, fintechs, alternative lenders, and community-based entrepreneurship support across Canada.

None of the 24 survivor entrepreneurs who participated in the sharing circles had even tried accessing traditional bank loans or microloan programs due to previous negative experiences from themselves or peers and a lack of trust in institutions lending to "people like me".

It shows that the problem is not simply a lack of confidence, financial literacy, or business ambition. Many survivors are not reaching these systems because the systems are not designed with their realities in mind.

Survivors do not lack talent, discipline, creativity, or business potential. Instead, they are often excluded because lenders rely on indicators such as credit history, stable income, collateral, formal business registration, and extensive documentation. For survivors, these indicators often reflect the impacts of abuse, financial control, interrupted employment, displacement, or coerced debt rather than their actual capacity or potential. As a result, **conventional measures of loan repayment risk fail to account for survivors' lived experiences and overlook their ability to succeed.**

The report also shows that Canada already has promising models. Some programs offer mentorship, peer support, flexible lending, community-based delivery, and support for women, newcomers, Indigenous entrepreneurs, Black entrepreneurs, rural entrepreneurs, and other underserved groups. However, these supports remain uneven across the country. While some lenders do not treat credit scores or personal debt as the sole determining factors in loan decisions, none of the programs are specifically designed to address economic abuse, coerced debt, privacy risks, repayment pressure, trauma, safety planning, and the long term financial recovery needs of survivors.

This report calls for a safe capital approach and proposes a model for a survivor-centred, trauma- and violence-informed microloan entrepreneurship program. Safe capital means more than giving someone access to a loan. It means making sure survivors have privacy, informed choice, flexible documentation, fair assessment, repayment protections, culturally-responsive support, business coaching, and safe referrals. It also means ensuring that survivors are not pushed into debt before they are ready or before it is safe.

The report concludes with recommendations and calls on governments, financial institutions, credit unions, lenders, entrepreneurship programs, and community organizations to work together to build safer pathways to capital for survivors. This includes stronger investment in community-based support, better referral systems, trauma- and violence-informed lending practices, staff training, privacy protections, flexible documentation, and survivor-centred program design.

Canada has an opportunity to take leadership on this issue. By connecting survivor entrepreneurship with financial inclusion, women's entrepreneurship, gender-based violence prevention, anti-fraud work, and inclusive economic growth, Canada can build a model that promotes both safety and economic opportunity for survivors.

Survivors deserve financial systems that recognize the long-term impacts of economic abuse and support their path toward financial independence. They deserve access to opportunity without judgment, support without harm, and economic pathways built on dignity, choice, safety, and long-term stability. Achieving this will require governments, financial institutions, and lenders to adopt survivor-responsive policies and financing models that remove structural barriers and ensure survivors have equitable access to the capital and support needed to build sustainable businesses.

Message from the CEO

Survivor entrepreneurship must be understood as more than an individual pathway to income. It is a financial inclusion issue, an economic justice issue, and a systems change priority for Canada.

For many victims and survivors of economic abuse, entrepreneurship can offer a pathway to safety, autonomy, financial recovery, and long term economic security. However, survivors often face structural barriers that limit their ability to access capital, build credit, open business accounts, or participate fully in entrepreneurship programs. These barriers may include coerced debt, damaged credit, interrupted employment, legal costs, housing instability, child care responsibilities, immigration related challenges, restricted access to documents, and ongoing financial surveillance.

These realities should not be treated as personal financial failure. They are often the direct result of coercion, control, violence, and systems that were not designed to recognize the economic consequences of abuse.

At the Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment, we believe Canada has an opportunity to lead in building safer and more inclusive pathways to capital for survivors. This requires moving beyond traditional lending models that rely too heavily on credit history, collateral, formal business registration, and rigid documentation requirements. For survivors, these indicators may reflect abuse and financial control rather than capacity, readiness, or entrepreneurial potential. This report does not position microloans as the only solution. Microloans remain a form of debt and may not be safe or appropriate for every survivor.

A strategic survivor-centred approach must include a range of lower risk economic pathways, including grants, entrepreneurship training, mentorship, matched savings, employment supports, credit counselling, financial education, and non-repayable supports.

Safe capital requires more than access to financing. It requires trauma and violence informed lending practices, flexible documentation, privacy protections, fair risk assessment, repayment safeguards, culturally responsive supports, and strong referral pathways between financial institutions, entrepreneurship programs, survivor serving organizations, and government systems.

This report calls on governments, financial institutions, lenders, credit unions, entrepreneurship programs, and community partners to recognize survivor entrepreneurship as part of Canada's broader economic growth, financial inclusion, women's entrepreneurship, and gender based violence prevention agenda.

Survivors deserve access to financial systems that support dignity, choice, safety, and long term independence. Building these systems is not only the right thing to do. It is essential to advancing inclusive economic development and ensuring that no survivor is excluded from opportunity because of financial harm caused by abuse.

Meseret Haileyesus
Founder and Executive Director, Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment

> My experiences taught me resilience, empathy, and the importance of setting strong boundaries. They've made me more determined to succeed, not just for profit, but to create change.

Survivor sharing circle participant, July 28, 2025

Introduction

Survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and economic abuse face profound barriers to financial independence in Canada. These barriers are structural, rooted in systemic inequities within the labour market and financial systems, and disproportionately affect women who are racialized, single mothers, or victim-survivors of employment sabotage.

For many survivors, entrepreneurship offers an alternative path to stability, self-sufficiency, and leadership because of the flexibility and empowerment it provides. However, discriminatory lending practices, restrictive eligibility criteria, and societal stigma around violence prevent survivor entrepreneurs from accessing the microloans and financial services needed to launch and grow their businesses. These challenges are often compounded by intersecting forms of discrimination and systemic barriers related to survivors' experiences of violence and trauma, their identities as women in traditionally male-dominated sectors, and, for many, their experiences as Indigenous and racialized individuals, newcomers, refugees, persons with disabilities, or members of other underserved communities facing bias and exclusion. Existing programs are rarely designed to reflect these layered realities, leaving many survivors excluded from opportunities intended to foster economic participation.

Survivors do not lack ambition, talent, discipline, or business potential. Too often, they are excluded by lending systems that treat the financial consequences of abuse, including coerced debt, damaged credit, disrupted employment, limited savings, and restricted access to documentation, as personal financial failure.

Consequently, lending decisions may be based on financial histories that have been shaped by abuse and coercive control, rather than an individual's actual creditworthiness, financial capability, or entrepreneurial potential.
This underscores the need to situate survivor entrepreneurship within a broader policy and system change context, where access to capital is not only a matter of individual financial assessment but also of addressing structural barriers created through economic abuse.

Survivor entrepreneurship should therefore be understood not only as a pathway to business ownership, but as a national economic safety, financial inclusion, and recovery issue. Reframing microloan reform in this way helps situate survivor entrepreneurship within economic abuse prevention, anti-fraud strategy, women's entrepreneurship policy, financial inclusion, and inclusive growth.

This report starts with an overview of the current state of women's entrepreneurship in Canada and follows with highlights insights from survivors' experiences with entrepreneurship and access to microloans and examines the existing landscape of microloan programs that may be accessible to survivors across the country. It concludes by outlining a survivor-centred, trauma- and violence-informed microloan entrepreneurship model, along with policy recommendations for the federal government, financial institutions and other lenders, and community-based organizations to enhance survivors' entrepreneurship and improve their access to capital.

Methodology

This report was developed using a survivor-informed, policy-focused, and systems-change approach. The purpose was to better understand the barriers survivors of economic abuse face when accessing entrepreneurship financing, microloans, and business development support in Canada, and to identify opportunities for safer and more inclusive financial pathways.

The report draws on several sources of evidence:

First, CCFWE reviewed existing research, policy reports, and data on women's entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, economic abuse, access to capital, microloans, and barriers faced by Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer, refugee, rural, disabled, and other underserved entrepreneurs. This helped situate survivor entrepreneurship within broader economic, gender equality, and financial inclusion policy contexts.

Second, CCFWE held five virtual sharing circles with 24 survivor entrepreneurs and business owners. Participants included women from equity-deserving communities, including newcomer, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women, located across rural and urban areas in Ontario. These conversations explored survivors' experiences with entrepreneurship, access to funding, lending barriers, business development supports, trust in financial systems, and the role of lived experience in shaping business ownership.

Fourth, CCFWE conducted an environmental scan of microloan and entrepreneurship support programs across Canada. This included national programs, provincial and territorial initiatives, credit union models, community-based lending programs, women's enterprise organizations, Indigenous entrepreneurship supports, newcomer-focused programs, peer lending models, and survivor-relevant entrepreneurship supports. The scan looked at how existing programs address access to capital, mentorship, business readiness, credit history, documentation, repayment flexibility, and wraparound support.

Finally, the report applies a policy and systems-change analysis to identify gaps in current lending and entrepreneurship systems. This includes assessing how traditional lending criteria may exclude survivors whose financial histories have been shaped by coerced debt, damaged credit, interrupted employment, limited savings, restricted documentation, or ongoing financial control.

This report does not evaluate the effectiveness of each lending program or provide financial advice to survivors. Rather, it identifies structural barriers, promising practices, and policy opportunities to strengthen safer, trauma and violence informed, survivor-centred approaches to entrepreneurship financing in Canada.

The Status of Women Entrepreneurship in Canada

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), so those with one to 499 paid employees, are central to the Canadian economy, accounting for 99.5% of total businesses and generating almost 50% of total revenue in the private sector. [ISED]

While SMEs can have a strong impact on Canada's entire social and economic outcomes, the entrepreneurial gender gap limits this potential. Globally, women are still less likely to start a business or to know an entrepreneur or investor personally. They are also twice as likely as men to close a business due to personal or family reasons, underscoring how caregiving and household responsibilities constrain entrepreneurship opportunities. [GEM]

In Canada, women-owned businesses are only approximately 20% of all businesses in 2025 [WEKH]. Women entrepreneurs continue to face persistent structural and intersectional barriers that limit their full participation in and growth within Canada's economy. This underrepresentation carries significant economic implications. According to a report by McKinsey Global Institute,

"Advancing women's equality in Canada has the potential to add $150 billion in incremental GDP in 2026, or a 0.6 percent increase to annual GDP growth."

With the federal government currently prioritizing economic growth and GDP expansion, this represents a critical opportunity to address the systemic and individual barriers that women entrepreneurs continue to face.

Financial barriers

Access to financing remains one of the most significant challenges for survivors and women in general.

Women-owned businesses are generally less likely to receive funding than male-owned businesses and if they do, the amounts are on average smaller. As a consequence, women are also more likely to use their personal or household savings for funding instead of financing from banks or investors. [ICTC]

Evidence across studies points to a consistent pattern: In its recent report based on surveys with women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs across Canada, PARO found that 71.6% of women entrepreneurs used personal savings to sustain or grow their business [PARO]. Similarly, findings from WEOC show that roughly 7 in 10 rely on personal funds while 50% also turn to credit cards as an accessible and quickly to use option but carrying higher risks and costs over time [WEOC].

Reliance on personal/household financing increases vulnerability to setbacks or economic downturns. 20% of PARO's study respondents mentioned they have no personal savings left. A third up to one half experienced difficulties meeting household, food or healthcare needs and two-thirds had these challenges impact their business. [PARO]. **The challenges women-owned businesses face are also reinforced by perceptions and experiences of bias within financial systems. In general, 40% of PARO respondents agreed with the statement that financial institutions and investors "won't lend to people like me" with Indigenous and racialized women entrepreneurs being at least three times more likely than non-intersectional entrepreneurs to expect bias or discrimination from banks.** These concerns are not unfounded. Traditional lending criteria, based on the "5 Cs" (character, capacity, capital, collateral, and conditions), can disadvantage newcomers, owners of newer or smaller businesses, and those with family obligations or past financial disruptions such as illness or divorce.

In 2023, majority women-owned SMEs paid higher average interest rates on lines of credit (13.7%) compared to men-owned (10.4%) and equally-owned businesses (11.2%), indicating bias in how funders assess and price risk. [WEKH]

This biased difference in the pricing of risk has important policy implications. When women owned businesses are charged higher borrowing costs, lending practices can reproduce and deepen existing gender and racial inequities. Particularly for entrepreneurs facing various intersectional barriers, even modest differences in interest rates can shape whether a loan remains viable or instead contributes to financial strain, increased default risk, and potential credit deterioration.

For traditional banking, women-owned businesses that tend to be mostly smaller in size, are often not big enough to invest in but too established for microloans. Some banks have not adapted to modern business models, requiring storefronts or full-time employment to legitimize business loans. [PARO/ICTC]

In terms of investors, specifically the venture capital ecosystem is still very male-dominated with an average of only 12% of all partners being women. [ICTC]

"Pitching to investors who are [almost all] male, when you are building a business that is for women understood by women and will be used by women using technology, is like throwing yourself in the lion's den because it's male dominated. It's like, impossible. It's impossible." [racialized newcomer, WEOC]

Consequently, women entrepreneurs are seeking alternative funding with government and other public grants. These often offer smaller amounts of capital with higher administrative challenges and stronger competition for the same funding that discourage them from applying in the first place. [ICTC]

Legitimacy and recognition barriers

Women entrepreneurs also describe how they repeatedly must legitimize their businesses in an ecosystem that is not designed for their sectors, business model and personal circumstances. This "legitimacy tax" costs women entrepreneurs a lot of time spent on additional administrative, financial and mental workloads that take away from entrepreneurial and revenue-generating activities. [PARO]

Women-owned businesses tend to be smaller, and are more likely to be home-based, part-time, creative and care-centred. They are largely concentrated in the service industry and other sectors that do not fall in the typical entrepreneurship models. Women-owned SMEs are consistently found in retail trade (26.2%), knowledge-based industries (20.9%), and tourism (18.1%).

In recent years, this representation has declined while women entrepreneurs are increasing their presence in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fishing and oil and gas. [WEKH]

However, even when operating in more "credible" sectors,

women entrepreneurs face higher scrutiny and feel as if they have to legitimize their business much more often than businesses owned by men. This "legitimacy tax" costs women entrepreneurs a lot of time spent on additional administrative, financial and mental workloads that take away from entrepreneurial and revenue-generating activities. [PARO]

Generally, investors, predominantly still white cis-men, choose to finance what feels familiar to them. [ICTC] Consequently, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized women entrepreneurs struggle to secure financing when trying to explain their business models and convince investors about the need within their community that their business wants to address. This is further compounded by systemic bias and distrust, leading many to feel they must meet higher standards than their white male counterparts.

"Participants across all regions reported spending significant time explaining and re-explaining their business models to institutions that lack relevant categories, adapting applications and compliance strategies to fit frameworks that do not reflect their sector or scale, and navigating contradictory information across programs, departments, and jurisdictions." [PARO]

Intersectional barriers

In 2023, 17.8% of all SMEs in Canada were majority women-owned.Of this 17.8%, 30.4% were Indigenous women-owned, 38.8% were Black women-owned, 21.3% were racialized women -owned, 23.1% were owned by women with disabilities, and 35.7% were 2SLGBTQIA+. [WEKH]

This percentage being over 100% showcases that oftentimes, women with intersecting identities tend to have higher rates of entrepreneurship than women overall in Canada.

However, these higher shares mask very low overall representation.

In absolute terms, Indigenous, Black, and 2SLGBTQIA+ women-owned SMEs each account for only about 0.5% of all SMEs, while racialized women-owned SMEs represent just 2.0%, highlighting their continued underrepresentation in the broader business landscape. [WEKH]

Generally, 2SLGBTQIA+, persons with disabilities, racialized, Indigenous, and newcomer entrepreneurs anticipate bias or discrimination in their interactions with funders and expect a general lack of support based on their identity or perceived "otherness." Consequently, they are also more likely to say they would have applied for funding if they had received guidance through the process. [WEOC]

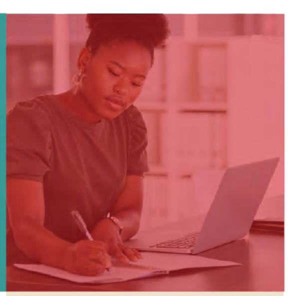
First Nation, Metis and Inuit women entrepreneurs often face exclusion from Western financial systems, compounded by geographic isolation, systemic racism, and limited access to social networks. [WEKH 2023] Interestingly, WEOC's report notes that Indigenous entrepreneurs are more likely to access credit unions and women's enterprise organizations than others (20% vs. 3% of non-indigenous entrepreneurs), and show greater interest in venture capital for future growth. However, 81% of Indigenous women entrepreneurs identified access to capital as a significant barrier to their business activities [WEKH] and are more likely to have difficulties with business finance terminology compared to other women entrepreneurs (58% compared to 41%). [WEOC]

Black and racialized women entrepreneurs encounter race-based discrimination in addition to gender-based barriers, resulting in greater difficulty accessing financing, higher borrowing costs, and fewer opportunities for mentorship and training. A survey by the African Canadian Senate Group found that systemic racism, limited access to capital, and weak business networks are key barriers for Black entrepreneurs: 76% said race made success harder, 75% would struggle to access $10,000, and only 19% trust banks. While not gender-disaggregated, these challenges are likely even more pronounced for Black women entrepreneurs. [WEKH 2023]

Immigrant women are only half as likely as immigrant men to engage in entrepreneurship, often due to both opportunity and labour market exclusion. They remain underrepresented and face barriers such as discrimination, limited access to funding and support services, language challenges, and a lack of cultural knowledge and social networks. [WEKH]

Less than 1% of Canadian SMEs are owned by persons with disabilities, and there is limited data on women entrepreneurs within this group. [WEKH] They are more likely to conclude that funders are not financing "people like me" (52% compared to 41% of women entrepreneurs without disabilities). Similarly, 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs are much more likely to not apply for funding due to negative experiences heard by others (21% compared to 9% of non 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs). [WEOC]

Overall, the reports demonstrate that women entrepreneurs in Canada continue to face interconnected financial, structural, and social barriers that limit their ability to start, sustain, and grow their businesses. These challenges are often further intensified for women with intersecting identities, underscoring the need for more inclusive and accessible entrepreneurial ecosystems.



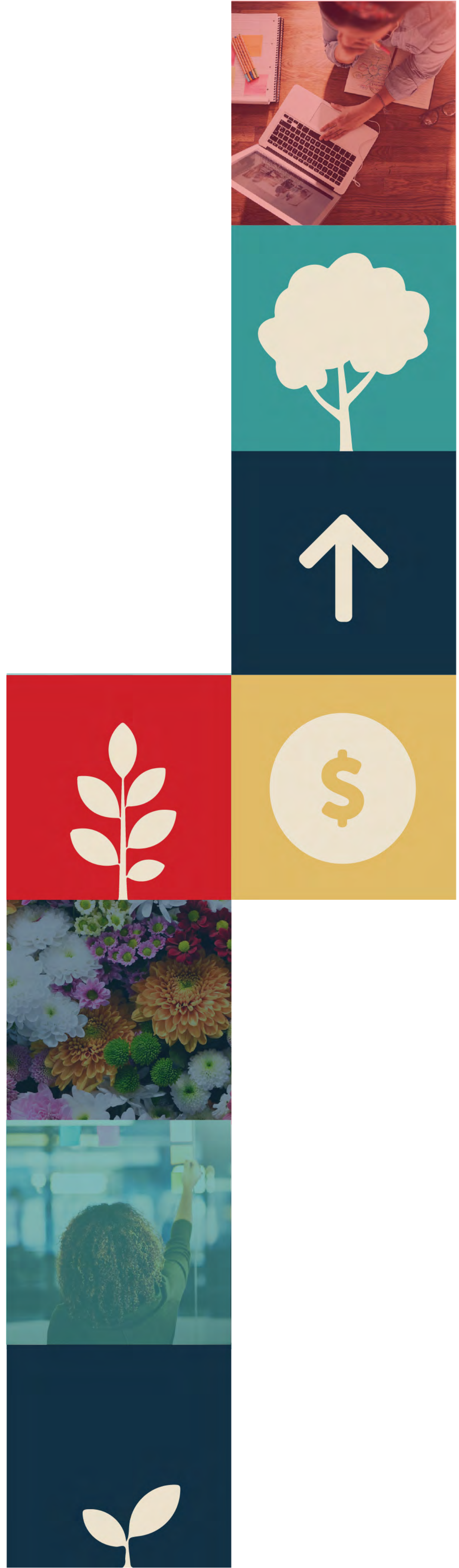
The Economic and Social Value of Women's Entrepreneurship

Women-owned businesses make distinct contributions to innovation and inclusive economic development. They are more likely to focus on organizational improvements and inclusive and environmentally sustainable practices. [WEKH 2023; WEKH] The majority of women-owned SMEs are significantly more likely to implement marketing innovations than men-owned SMEs (26.1% compared to 9.8%). Women entrepreneurs also tend to create more opportunities for equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous, Black, racialized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. [WEKH 2023] Investing in women-owned businesses would therefore directly support more innovative and inclusive business models, making targeted investments and grants a strategic way to drive innovation, economic growth, and broader workforce diversity in Canada.

Beyond these economic contributions, entrepreneurship can also serve as a pathway to empowerment, economic mobility, and greater inclusion for equity-deserving groups. For many Black entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship provides opportunities to build wealth, create community-based economic opportunities, and reduce racial economic disparities, while also offering flexibility, independence, and alternatives to labour market exclusion. Similarly, entrepreneurship can be particularly valuable for persons with disabilities by allowing greater control over work schedules, environments, and arrangements that reflect individual needs. In addition to increasing economic participation, entrepreneurship can strengthen self-confidence, autonomy, and overall well-being. [WEKH]

Investing specifically in survivor entrepreneurs should be understood within a broader framework of economic development, community wealth building, labour market participation, innovation, and violence prevention. When survivors have access to safe capital, business training, mentorship, and financial recovery support, they are better positioned to generate income, develop goods and services that respond to community needs, contribute to local economies, and rebuild long-term financial security.

This positions survivor entrepreneurship as a strategic priority for governments, regional development agencies, financial institutions, foundations, and other actors committed to inclusive and sustainable growth.



Entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic security

For many victim-survivors of economic abuse, entrepreneurship can offer an empowering alternative pathway to rebuilding economic security, independence, and long-term financial stability when traditional employment is inaccessible, unsafe, or insufficient.

At the same time, entrepreneurship should not be treated as a universal solution or as a replacement for strong social and economic support. For survivors, self employment may offer flexibility and autonomy, but it can also carry financial risk, unstable income, administrative burdens and repayment pressure. Entrepreneurship must therefore be one option among many safe economic pathways, alongside income support, childcare, employment protections, benefits, housing stability, debt relief, and access to trauma and violence-informed financial services.

Economic abuse and employment sabotage

Economic abuse is a range of behaviours that allow someone to control someone else's economic resources or freedoms. It refers to various tactics that limit an individual's financial autonomy, including but not limited to: denying them access to their money, exerting control over their resources, or leveraging intimidation and threats to constrain their economic freedom.

Employment sabotage is a very common form of economic abuse often coupled with emotional abuse. Tactics include harassment at work until the victim-survivor either leaves or is let go, threatening them to quit work or hindering them from obtaining employment.

In CCFWE's 2021 research study with victim-survivors based on Ottawa, 86% of respondents experienced employment sabotage and being demanded to quit work while 60% of them were threatened to end employment. [CCFWE 2021]

Employment sabotage often continues even after separation. A common experience is an ex-partner showing up at the workplace or contacting co-workers. Due to these safety concerns, many survivors leave their jobs or move into less public-facing roles, limiting their employment options.

In addition, women who have experienced or are experiencing economic abuse often have limited financial resources and cannot afford childcare, transportation, appropriate work clothing, or even stable housing, further restricting their ability to secure employment.

As a direct consequence of employment sabotage, many victim-survivors also have gaps in their resumes, as previous partners prevented them from working.

Another barrier is negative experiences with discrimination or bias, which make it harder to secure employment. Combined with ongoing mental health challenges from long-term trauma, many survivors feel overwhelmed by job searching and experience low self-esteem after years of emotional abuse.

Even in employment, many Indigenous, Black, and other racialized workers who have experienced economic abuse face compounded impacts related to both their identity and their experience as survivors. 49% reported that workplace discrimination worsened trauma symptoms from an abusive relationship. They often encounter fewer career opportunities, lower pay, and unequal hours, and may draw parallels between experiences of violence and racism. For those who already face workplace discrimination, there is often reluctance to disclose experiences of violence due to fear of stigmatization or job loss. [WomanAct]

These experiences can lead many survivors to consider entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway. Being their own boss offers greater control over their work environment, schedule, and interactions, reducing exposure to stigma, discrimination, or unsafe situations. It can also provide a sense of autonomy and flexibility that is often not available in traditional employment, particularly when managing ongoing safety or caregiving needs. At the same time, building a business can be deeply empowering, helping rebuild self-esteem, restore a sense of agency, and draw on the resilience developed through their experiences.

Experiences of Survivor Entrepreneurs in Canada

This section draws on discussions during five virtual sharing circles organized by CCFWE with 24 participants who identify as entrepreneurs or business owners, e.g. of a nail salon or a food catering company. Participants represented equity-deserving groups, including newcomer, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women, and were located across both rural and urban areas in Ontario. Their experiences demonstrate how the intersection of gender, survivorship, and entrepreneurship shapes both challenges and opportunities in their entrepreneurial journeys.

Participants of the sharing circles described facing a wide range of barriers when trying to access funding. Consistent with findings from the reports above, many survivors rely on personal savings or informal support networks such as family, friends, and community groups, which can create additional financial and emotional strain. For those who have experienced economic control in a previous intimate partner relationship, becoming financially dependent on others can feel particularly vulnerable and potentially retraumatizing. One participant also shared that losing money in their business was especially stressful because it involved a loved one's funds and could strain family relationships.

> I've found strength in building a business on my own terms. I've learned to advocate for myself, set boundaries, and use my story not as a source of shame but as a source of power

Survivor sharing circle participant, July 28, 2025

Survivor participants also noted the lack of clear and accessible information about available funding opportunities, leaving many unsure where to look or how to begin. The application processes themselves present significant obstacles, including strict eligibility criteria, extensive documentation requirements, and tight deadlines. Many are unable to meet these criteria, particularly due to limited credit history or low credit scores often as a direct consequence of economic abuse or status as a newcomer. In addition, navigating funding applications can be difficult, especially for those who face language barriers, as processes are not always accessible to non-English speakers. The volume of paperwork and short turnaround times for submissions further add to these challenges. As a result,

none of the 24 survivor entrepreneur participants even tried to access traditional loans or microloan programs through banks.

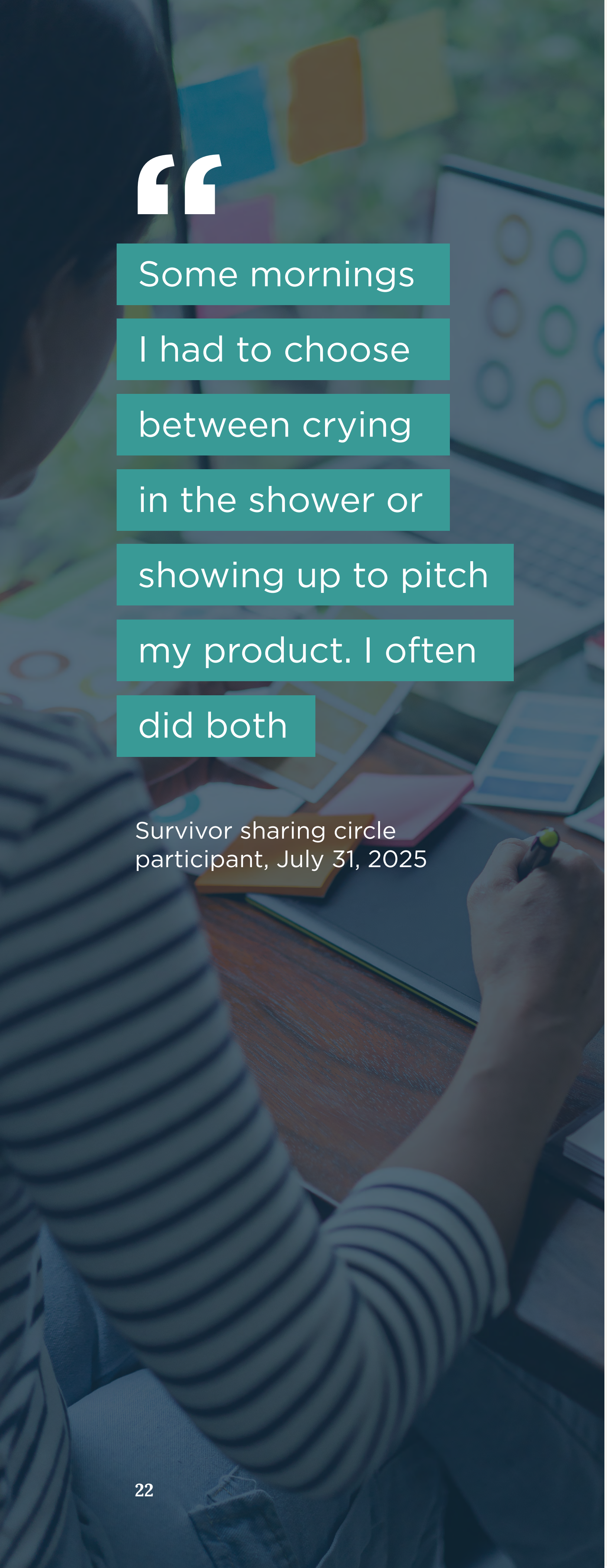
Sharing circle participants also perceived the entrepreneurial ecosystems as very male-dominated and not reflective of diverse lived experiences leading to challenges in building trust, forming partnerships, and being taken seriously. One participant noted "Being a woman of color, I've had to work harder to be seen as credible or 'investable' in spaces where decision-makers often don't look like me or understand my background" (July 29, 2025).

Funder organizations are often led by individuals who do not reflect their identities, contributing to hesitancy, lack of trust, and reduced confidence in engaging with these institutions.

This lack of representation led to experiences of not being taken seriously or feeling unheard in funding processes. Migration status can further impact access, with challenges such as language barriers, limited networks, and unfamiliarity with business systems. One participant shared that "race, migration status and gender [have] been a challenge for me to get resources for my business" (July 29, 2025). Another participant discussed how systemic racism plays a role in accessing funding and indicated "there is already a systemic bias" (July 28, 2025).

Limited representation also means fewer trusted resources, weaker networking opportunities, particularly for immigrants and newcomers, and a lack of visible role models to demonstrate what is possible. This is further compounded by higher household and childcare responsibilities, which limit participation in networking events and often place additional expectations on women to prioritize these responsibilities over their businesses.

Sharing circle participants highlighted challenges with limited information about available opportunities, registration or membership costs, and restrictive eligibility requirements. Even when accessible, programs are often organized by white funders and may feel unwelcoming due to discrimination, assumptions based on identity, lack of cultural awareness, and networking spaces that do not reflect or support the experiences of racialized women and other underrepresented groups. "As someone navigating business through the lens of my gender, race, and cultural background, I've often found myself in spaces where I wasn't fully seen, heard, or represented" (July 29, 2025).



> "Some mornings I had to choose between crying in the shower or showing up to pitch my product. I often did both
>
> Survivor sharing circle participant, July 31, 2025

Programs and opportunities led by Black organizations or by women from equity deserving communities were especially meaningful to survivors. Participants described these spaces as more supportive, relatable, culturally safe, and free from judgment, which allowed them to engage more openly and with greater confidence. Representation matters because it changes trust, perceived safety, relevance, and willingness to participate. Funders and lenders often underestimate how much a survivor's decision to apply depends on whether the program feels respectful, culturally responsive, and connected to their lived realities. As one participant shared, "I've learned to seek out spaces that reflect my values and where there's a clear intention to elevate underrepresented voices in my network space" (July 29, 2025). This highlights that trauma- and violence-informed, culturally sensitive entrepreneurship and networking programs are not only a "nice to have," but an essential infrastructure for equitable access to capital, trust building, and long term business success.

Lived experience as a challenge but also source of strength

Balancing personal healing with the demands of running a business presents significant challenges. Survivors often navigate ongoing emotional impacts of trauma alongside the pressures of entrepreneurship, which can feel overwhelming and compound stress. As one participant explained "Balancing day-to-day responsibilities, personal healing, and running a business has been one of the hardest parts of my journey" (July 29, 2025).

At the same time, resilience was a recurring theme across the sharing circles. While experiences of abuse are deeply traumatic, entrepreneurship often emerges as a pathway to rebuild autonomy, purpose, and stability. One survivor noted that starting her own business was a "life-changing decision" with which she has "taken control of my own life and my own finances" (July 28, 2025).

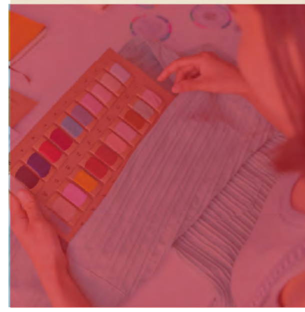
For many survivors, the development of skills and strengths, such as adaptability, determination, and problem-solving contributes to the process of healing that translates into their business practices. Entrepreneurship can provide a renewed sense of agency, pride, and forward momentum with one participant stating that being a survivor was "the driving force for me to strive [for] more" (July 28, 2025).

When reflecting on how far they have come, one survivor entrepreneur mentioned she takes pride in having "built a business that supports family back home". (July 29, 2025). Another one mentioned her proudest moment when she "hit 5-star reviews across all platforms." (July 29, 2025). One participant concluded "While the journey hasn't always been easy, it's made me more resilient, creative, and determined to pave a path not only for myself" (July 29, 2025).

Overall, the findings show that survivors face similar systemic barriers that are also experienced by women entrepreneurs more broadly. For survivor entrepreneurs, these challenges are both intensified and shaped by their lived experiences of economic abuse and other forms of violence. They may be navigating trauma while trying to build and sustain a business, adding an additional layer of complexity to entrepreneurship. On the other hand, these same lived experiences can also foster significant resilience, strength, and determination, which many survivors draw upon as they pursue economic independence and rebuilding stability through entrepreneurship.

Their experiences reconfirm barriers including systemic discrimination, limited access to capital, and exclusion from traditional entrepreneurial ecosystems. At the same time, they highlight the importance of tailored supports, inclusive networks, and accessible financial resources in enabling resilience and long-term business sustainability.

Access to microloan and other lending practices



As the previous sections highlight, barriers such as restrictive eligibility criteria, administrative burdens, limited awareness of available grants and loan opportunities, and encounters of discrimination and bias based on gender, survivorship, and intersecting identities discourage many survivor entrepreneurs from even attempting to access financing. For many, repeated experiences of exclusion contribute to a perception that banks and funders do not lend to people "like me" resulting in low trust and hesitation to seek financing at all.

As previously mentioned, none of the 24 survivor entrepreneurs who participated in CCFWE's sharing circles had accessed traditional bank loans or microloan programs. This finding is significant. When zero out of 24 survivor entrepreneurs have used formal loan pathways, the system is not reaching this segment of the population and points to barriers beyond individual readiness, including trust, safety, eligibility criteria, credit history, documentation requirements and the design of lending programs. This finding should inform future microloan policy, referral pathways, and survivor centred entrepreneurship supports

Experiences of Survivor Entrepreneurs in Canada

To better understand the current bank loan and microloan landscape in Canada, CCFWE conducted two different environmental scans, one on traditional loans available from financial institutions and another scan on microloan programs from credit unions and community organizations across Canada.

Traditional loans from financial institutions

CCFWE conducted an environmental scan of existing loan programs across 59 commercial banks, credit unions, fintechs, alternative lenders, and non-profit organizations in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec to examine the availability and accessibility of traditional banking loans for survivors. [Appendix A]

Across institutions, most lenders continue to rely on traditional lending criteria such as proof of income, proof of employment or business activity, and good credit history. These standards are generally accepted measures of the likelihood of the loan being repaid. They exist within a broader regulatory framework to ensure the stability of the overall banking system. As banks are deposit-taking institutions responsible for safeguarding clients' funds, lending decisions must balance access with legal, privacy, and risk management obligations to ensure financial system stability. At the same time, these current requirements disproportionately exclude survivors of economic abuse, many of whom may have limited financial stability, interrupted employment histories, coerced debt, damaged credit, or lack formal financial documentation.

Major banks often require in-person appointments or formal consultations before providing detailed loan information and generally restrict business loans to formally registered businesses. This creates an additional barrier for survivors and early-stage entrepreneurs operating informally, part-time, or in the process of establishing their businesses.

Loan rates among commercial banks, credit unions, and some non-profit lenders generally align with the prime rate plus or minus a few percentage points. However, fintech companies and alternative lenders often apply their own pricing structures, which can vary significantly and may result in higher borrowing costs for already financially vulnerable borrowers.

Loan amounts also vary considerably, ranging from a few hundred dollars to up to one million dollars depending on the lender and program.

Conclusion:

The scan shows that the current traditional lending landscape is not accessible for many survivors. Accepted indicators of the likelihood that a loan will be repaid such as strong credit history, formal business registration, stable income together with often high borrowing costs, create structural barriers that exclude those who experienced economic abuse and thus are often in early-stage or financially disrupted situations. Lenders should reconsider how they can demonstrate that they have conducted due diligence and appropriately assessed the risk level of a potential borrower without excluding many potential borrowers, such as those affected by coerced debt, where debt may have been incurred without their consent or knowledge. A coordinated, survivor-centred financing approach is needed to better align entrepreneurship and women's economic inclusion policy with the realities of economic abuse. This includes access to capital alongside flexible repayment, credit recovery, business training, mentorship, privacy protections, and community-based support.

Microloan programs in Canada

Before reviewing available programs, it is important to distinguish between different types of financial and entrepreneurship supports. Microloans are small repayable loans, usually used to support business startup or growth. Microfinance is broader and may include small loans, savings tools, coaching, financial education, or other support. Grants are non repayable funds and usually carry lower financial risk for survivors than loans. Credit building loans are mainly designed to help rebuild credit history, not necessarily to finance a business. Entrepreneurship training provides skills, planning support, mentorship, or readiness building, but does not always include direct capital.

These differences matter because the level of risk is not the same. A $2,000 grant and a $5,000 repayable loan are not the same kind of support. For survivors of economic abuse, repayment obligations, interest, default consequences, credit reporting, and privacy requirements can affect safety, stress, and long term financial recovery.

National programs

CCFWE conducted an additional environmental scan of existing microloan programs across Canada to better understand the current microfinance landscape. The goal was to assess the extent to which available programs may be accessible and applicable to survivors of economic abuse who are seeking funding to start or grow a business.

CCFWE identified five main national microloan or microfinancing initiatives operating across Canada that support underserved populations through more flexible lending approaches than traditional financial institutions.

Rise Asset Development supports entrepreneurs experiencing mental health or substance use challenges through a dignity-based model that combines flexible microfinancing with coaching and peer support. It is the only program identified by CCFWE that explicitly describes itself as trauma-informed, relies primarily on self-identification for eligibility, and does not treat low or poor credit scores as a determining factor. Rise also began offering dedicated women entrepreneurship programming earlier this year.

Both the training model and microloan approach appear highly relevant for survivors of economic abuse. However, applicants must self-identify as experiencing mental health or addiction challenges to qualify. While many survivors may experience long-term mental health impacts as a result of violence and abuse, not all may recognize these experiences as mental health-related or feel ready to disclose them in order to access support. Survivors should not have to frame their experiences through mental health or substance use lenses in order to qualify for safe capital.

The **Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC) National Loan Program** operates under the federal Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) and is designed to increase access to financing for women-owned businesses across Canada. It provides loans of up to $50,000, alongside mentorship and regional application support, to women entrepreneurs with less than $2 million in gross annual revenue. Partner organizations across Canada help assess business readiness and support applicants with requirements such as business plans and two-year cash flow forecasts before referring them to WEOC. Unlike many traditional lenders, WEOC does not require a minimum credit score and recognizes that poor credit may result from circumstances rather than character. This also includes experiences of intimate partner violence. Instead, the program focuses on current financial behaviour and repayment capacity. Once clients are approved and receive funding, follow-up and repayment support are often provided through partner organizations. The program is limited to permanent residents and Canadian citizens.

This program could be a valuable opportunity for survivor women entrepreneurs, particularly through partner organizations that provide support with business readiness and required documentation. While the program is not specifically targeted toward survivors or underserved populations, it does take circumstances such as intimate partner violence into account when assessing personal debt.

WEOC and its regional partner organizations could play an important role in developing a formal survivor entrepreneurship pathway. This pathway could include economic abuse informed screening, survivor centred referral protocols, flexible documentation for coerced debt and interrupted income and staff training on how abuse can affect credit, income, savings, and business readiness. A formal pathway would help ensure that survivors are not only considered on a case by case basis, but are supported through a consistent, safe and informed process.
Futurpreneur supports young entrepreneurs aged 18–39 through financing, mentorship, and business resources. The organization also offers targeted programs for Black and Indigenous entrepreneurs, relying on self-identification. They specifically highlight the additional systemic barriers entrepreneurs with intersectional backgrounds face and include mentorship from individuals with lived experience, networking opportunities, and tailored support opportunities. One of the few programs,

Futurpreneur also supports side-hustles and gradual business development, which may be particularly relevant for survivors seeking to rebuild financial stability over time while balancing other personal responsibilities.

However, applicants are still subject to financial eligibility requirements, including a personal credit check (hard inquiry). Individuals who have declared bankruptcy must generally have been discharged for at least five years. While the mentorship and community-based support model appears highly relevant for survivors, credit history and bankruptcy requirements may still create barriers for those affected by economic abuse and coerced debt.

The Indigenous Women Entrepreneurship (IWE) is delivered nationally through Indigenous Financial Institutions (IFIs) under the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA). Unlike many mainstream lending programs, IWE combines microloans with culturally grounded mentorship, advisory services, workshops, and flexible business support for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women. The program aims to address systemic barriers faced by Indigenous women entrepreneurs, including limited access to capital, geographic isolation, and exclusion from traditional financial systems. Depending on the participating IFI, applicants may access loans of up to $50,000 alongside networking and ongoing business support. Eligibility generally requires applicants to identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis women and be actively involved in the ownership and operation of the business.

The IWE model appears specifically relevant for Indigenous survivors of economic abuse because of its relationship-based and community-led approach. Its focus on mentorship, representation, and flexible support may help address commonly noted barriers such as distrust of institutions, limited support networks, and exclusion from mainstream entrepreneurial spaces. However, eligibility and lending requirements still vary across participating Indigenous Financial Institutions.

This reiterates that entrepreneurship and microloan programs for Indigenous Peoples should be Indigenous-led, and culturally grounded. Financing and business support should be delivered through trusted, community-based approaches that reflect Indigenous governance, cultures, relationships, and priorities.

Community Futures Network of Canada operates through a decentralized model with 267 community-based offices. Funded by the federal government, the organization provides loans to individuals who are unable to access traditional bank financing and are living in rural and remote communities, including many Indigenous communities. Loan amounts range from $5,000 to $150,000 and include flexible interest rates and repayment terms. While not specifically targeted to women, around 40–50% of clients are women entrepreneurs.

With a focus on “developmental lending”, the organization offers wraparound support to clients to become “bankable”, including entrepreneurship training, business plan development, mentorship, and referrals to small business enterprise centres. Local loan officers work closely with applicants to assess readiness, strengthen applications, and provide ongoing guidance. Lending decisions are made through local, community-based boards using a character-driven approach rooted in local knowledge rather than traditional banking criteria. Applicants must demonstrate a viable business idea and commitment, but ventures can be part-time or home-based, and there are no strict eligibility requirements beyond this.

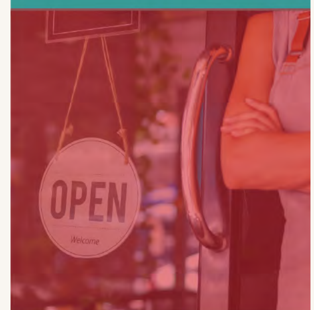
While not designed for specific populations such as survivors, the model is community-driven and can be particularly accessible for rural entrepreneurs who are impacted by a low credit score.

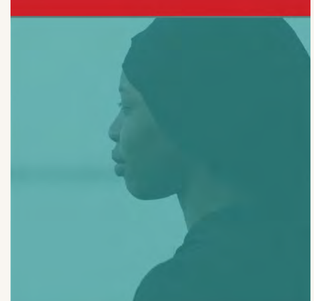
Special Mention

One Spark is a Canadian organization that supports women who have experienced violence in building financial independence through entrepreneurship. It does not provide microloans per se but can offer a $2,000 CAD start-up fund. The programs are designed to help participants develop sustainable self-employment pathways through structured support, including business planning assistance, mentorship, financial advisory services, and access to basic startup tools such as laptops and software. Participants must identify as women who have been impacted by violence and are seeking pathways toward economic stability and independence. Access is typically provided through referral partners and an intake screening instead of open application processes.

It seems to be the only entrepreneurship program in Canada specifically focused on supporting survivors of violence, combining trauma-informed support with entrepreneurship programming.

While not a microloan program for entrepreneurship, **Windmill Microlending** addresses structural exclusion by providing low-interest loans and wraparound support for internationally trained immigrants and refugees who lack Canadian credit history. Its focus is workforce integration rather than entrepreneurship, as loans are restricted to credential recognition, education, and employment-related expenses rather than business start-ups. While not directly relevant for entrepreneurship financing, the model demonstrates how alternative lending structures can support economic integration for underserved populations.





Conclusion:

Overall, the environmental scan suggests that Canada's microloan landscape is gradually moving toward more inclusive financing models, particularly through reduced emphasis on credit scores, mentorship integration, and community-based supports.

One clear trend across national programs is the integration of financing with non-financial supports such as mentorship, coaching, business planning assistance, networking opportunities, and financial literacy training. Rather than offering loans alone, many programs recognize that underserved entrepreneurs often require relationship-based and capacity-building support to successfully start or sustain businesses. Programs such as Futurepreneur or IWE particularly recognize systemic barriers for entrepreneurs of intersectional backgrounds and focus on providing tailored support to their lived experiences.

Secondly, there seems to be a growing understanding that traditional credit systems exclude many potential borrowers. Several programs explicitly acknowledge that applicants may have low credit, limited Canadian credit history, or be considered "high-risk" by mainstream financial institutions but should not automatically be disqualified from accessing capital. Programs such as Rise Asset Development, WEOC and Community Futures Network of Canada notably reduce emphasis on minimum credit score requirements and instead assess broader indicators such as business viability, entrepreneurial readiness, or participation in coaching and support programs. This is particularly relevant for survivors of economic abuse, newcomers, and individuals rebuilding financial stability who may not meet conventional lending criteria despite having viable business ideas.

At the same time, most national programs continue to operate within structured eligibility and risk-management frameworks. Access to financing is frequently tied to immigration status, residency, age requirements, business formalization, or demonstrated readiness through business plans and financial projections. Nearly all identified programs are limited to Canadian citizens, permanent residents, refugees, or other individuals with secure immigration status, excluding many with temporary or precarious status. Some initiatives also require a detailed business plan, projected cash flows, proof of repayment capacity, or for even formal business registration, which can create barriers for entrepreneurs operating informally, part-time, or in the early stages of business development.

In addition, many programs remain segmented by demographic category, such as women, youth, immigrants, or Indigenous entrepreneurs, which can improve targeted access while also contributing to a fragmented and difficult-to-navigate support ecosystem. From an operational perspective, most national initiatives rely on local partner organizations to deliver services and provide more tailored, community-based support.

A key opportunity emerging from the environmental scan is to establish survivor-informed design standards for microloan programs. Embedding survivor-centred principles into program design would help ensure that financing models are responsive to the impacts of economic abuse while promoting greater consistency across the entrepreneurship support ecosystem.

Provincial and territorial programs

An environmental scan of provincial and territorial microloan initiatives across Canada demonstrates a much broader diversity of approaches than those observed at the national level. Provincial and community-based initiatives often adopt more flexible, relationship-based, and localized models designed around economic inclusion and poverty reduction. Many of these programs explicitly recognize that traditional financial institutions exclude large segments of the population, particularly women, newcomers, racialized communities, Indigenous entrepreneurs, and low-income individuals.

Credit unions with microloan programs position themselves as alternatives to conventional banking systems for entrepreneurs who may lack strong credit history or other financial factors. Instead, they focus on supporting early-stage and underserved entrepreneurs through a combination of financing and non-financial support. While eligibility criteria vary, most prioritize business viability, applicant readiness, and social inclusion objectives alongside traditional financial considerations such as income stability.

Credit unions

Alterna Savings is an Ontario-based credit union that offers personal and business banking services, including community-focused microfinance programs designed to improve access to financing for underserved entrepreneurs. Of particular interest to survivors is the Income Builder Loan, a microfinance program that supports individuals seeking to increase their income through self-employment. It is intended for people with limited income or assets of below $30,000 CAD who may not qualify for traditional credit. Eligible applicants must be Canadian residents aged 18 or older and live and work in Ontario. To qualify for a loan ranging from $1,000 to $5,000, applicants must provide a business summary or business plan, 12 months of projected cash flow, proof of personal income, and six months of bank statements

The Working Women Business Loan provides financing to women entrepreneurs who are already operating revenue-generating businesses and seeking to grow their ventures. Applicants must be Canadian residents, own at least 51% of the women-owned business, live and work in Ontario and have a personal income below $50,000. To qualify for a loan ranging from $1,000 to $25,000, applicants must provide a well-documented business plan with 24 months projected cash flow and business registration documents.

Desjardins Group is a Canadian financial cooperative primarily serving Quebec and parts of Ontario through its caisse network, offering banking, insurance, and social finance programs that support individuals, businesses, and entrepreneurs. Their microcredit program provides loans of up to $20,000 for startup or early-stage businesses and is intended for individuals who are not eligible for conventional credit. Applicants must demonstrate a viable business plan, and apply through a partner community microcredit organization. Alongside financing, successful applicants can also receive additional coaching and business support.

Desjardins' Créavenir program supports young entrepreneurs aged 18–39 starting or growing a business that is less than three years old. It offers a combination of financing (generally up to $15,000–$30,000) or potential small grants of up to about $5,000. They also receive business mentorship and coaching support.

Vancity is a credit union based in British Columbia that provides personal and business banking services with a strong focus on community investment, social impact, and inclusive finance. It offers a range of microloan and business financing programs designed to support entrepreneurs who may face barriers accessing traditional credit, including startups and early-stage businesses. In addition to financing, Vancity also provides wraparound support such as mentorship, business advice, and networking opportunities to help entrepreneurs build capacity and long-term sustainability.

Their women entrepreneurship program runs in partnership with WeBC, a non profit supporting women entrepreneurs in British Columbia and is open to women, and anyone who identifies as a woman or non-binary individual for loans ranging from $25,000 for new business up to $250,000 for established businesses. Their Black entrepreneurship program is delivered in partnership with the Federation of African Canadian Economics (FACE) to offer microloans from $10,000 to $25,000 to Black entrepreneurs who apply through FACE. Vancity's Indigenous entrepreneurship program offers loans from $25,000 to $250,000 for businesses that are at least 51% owned by individuals identifying as Indigenous. Eligibility requirements for all programs commonly include completing a business training and submitting a viable business plan approved by a professional advisor.

Community organizations

Some local community organizations positioned themselves as facilitators in the microfinance ecosystem by preparing entrepreneurs to become "loan-ready" through business training, mentorship, and financial planning support before connecting them to partnered credit unions or lenders that provide microloans. These organizations play a bridging role by strengthening business viability and improving access to formal financing for underserved entrepreneurs.

The **Access Community Capital Fund** supports underserved early-stage entrepreneurs in Ontario, including women and visible minorities, through business training, coaching and funding. It provides business training, mentorship, and market access through programs such as the ACCESS Business Lab and ACCESS Business Marketplace, which help early-stage entrepreneurs develop skills and gain real-world experience. In partnership with Alterna Savings, ACESS will facilitate business loans of up to $20,000 to eligible graduates of the Business Lab who have received training and coaching, and are ready to take on a loan after meeting the eligibility requirements. Access previously offered a separate character-based loan program which will be reinstated once funding is secured.

The **Ottawa Community Loan Fund (OCLF)** is a community-based lender that helps individuals access financing and business support when they may not qualify for traditional bank loans. It focuses on reducing barriers to entrepreneurship by working with community partners and offering more flexible lending options for underserved entrepreneurs. OCLF offers microloans of up to about $15,000 to individuals facing barriers to traditional financing, working in partnership with institutions such as Alterna Savings and Desjardins. It supports applicants through business planning and cash-flow development and assesses eligibility on a case-by-case basis based on business viability and repayment capacity. OCLF previously offered targeted support such as home-based business programs for women and integrated language and entrepreneurship training for newcomer women. However, both programs no longer exist due to lack of funding.

PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise is a non-profit social enterprise that supports women entrepreneurs across Ontario through microloans, peer lending, business training, mentorship, and advisory services. Its programs are designed to help women start, grow, and scale businesses, particularly those facing barriers to accessing traditional financing. PARO offers a range of financing pathways, including peer lending circles with small staged microloans, grants, and support accessing larger loans through programs such as the Women Entrepreneurship Loan Fund.

PARO is also the Loan Fund Partner for the Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC) National Loan Program (see national microloans) in Ontario and New Brunswick. In that role, PARO supports women entrepreneurs in both provinces to prepare for and access WEOC loans by providing business advising, business plan support, mentorship, training, and application guidance before referring applicants to WEOC for final loan consideration.

Their additional Peer Lending Circles are a particularly innovative program through which small groups of women entrepreneurs meet regularly to provide peer mentorship, networking, accountability, and support while also participating in the review and approval of microloan applications within their circle. Members can access microloans ranging from $1,000 to $5,000 even those with no or a low credit score and potential distrust in banks.

Beyond financing, PARO provides wraparound entrepreneurship support including business plan development, mentorship, networking, training workshops, and one-on-one counselling.

While PARO is not specifically designed for survivors of violence or economic abuse, its flexible, supportive, and women-centered approach may make entrepreneurship support more accessible for women facing financial barriers or disrupted credit histories.

Most of the above community microloan programs are limited to the eligibility criteria of partnering credit unions or WEOC requirements. However, they offer valuable support for entrepreneurs to get them "loan ready" by assisting them in getting the necessary requirements to successfully apply for a microloan.

Other community microloan programs specifically focus on underserved populations. Programs exist specifically for women entrepreneurs, Indigenous entrepreneurs, Black entrepreneurs, newcomers, and rural communities. These organizations recognize that representation and culturally relevant support matter significantly and integrate mentorship, networking, and community-building alongside financing.

Community Business Development Corporations (CBDCs) are non-profit, community-based lenders that provide financing and business support to small businesses, mainly in rural Atlantic Canada. While not officially offering microloan programs, they provide repayable loans for start-ups (First Time Entrepreneur Loan), expansion, equipment, and working capital. CBDC offices also offer training, and one-on-one business counselling for entrepreneurs looking to start or grow their business. Eligibility is based on having a viable business idea and operating within rural Atlantic Canada, with decisions focused on business potential and local impact rather than strict bank credit requirements. In general, CBDC offers more flexible access compared to traditional lenders because of their relationship-based, community-driven approach and willingness to consider broader financial circumstances.

Similarly, **Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development (CEED)** supports entrepreneurs in Nova Scotia through a combination of financing, training, mentorship, and business advisory services. It offers character-based, community-focused loans up to about $50,000 for start-ups and small businesses, along with programs that help entrepreneurs develop business plans, validate ideas, and strengthen operations.

Loans are generally for individuals who are starting or growing a business and can demonstrate a viable business idea, clear use of funds, and repayment capacity. CEED focuses less on credit history and more on business potential, readiness, and commitment, making it more accessible for potential survivor entrepreneurs than traditional bank financing.

While not specifically designed for women, survivors or equity-deserving groups, their wraparound support and less rigid credit focus can help entrepreneurs whose financial histories have been affected by coercion or other forms of economic abuse.

The Québec ecosystem stands out in particular for its highly networked and collaborative approach to entrepreneurship support. About 20 independent microloan programs operate under one provincial "**Microentreprendre**" framework which is operating through a community-based microcredit model. Funded entirely through private community capital rather than banks or credit unions, financing comes from community members, unions, organizations, businesses, and individuals, which is then reinvested into the community through microloans and entrepreneurship support. The network focuses on local economic development and serves as an alternative entry point for individuals who may be excluded from mainstream financial systems. Representatives mentioned in consultations that local organizations have a well-developed entrepreneurial support ecosystem where individuals can be directed to appropriate programs based on their needs. They provide holistic support, including technical assistance, financial guidance, and business development services. Clients are accompanied throughout their journey and referred internally as needed to ensure they receive the right type of support.

Structured referral pathways to gender-based violence support organizations would enable survivor entrepreneurs to access appropriate safety, legal, and psychosocial support alongside entrepreneurship and financial services, ensuring a more integrated and responsive support system.

Microcredit Montreal is one example that works within Microentreprendre but as many local organizations, also offering special local loans and programs. Along their microloan program, the organization offers entrepreneurship training programs for women in both English and French. Over four months, the program focuses on developing business ideas, confidence, and long-term readiness alongside one-on-one support and continued follow-up after program completion. Many participants include refugee women and newcomer women beginning their entrepreneurial journey. The organization also referenced programming connected to women's economic empowerment and sustainable livelihoods, including workshops that assess participants' financial knowledge, external barriers, and lived realities such as intimate partner violence. Services include personal financial education, budgeting consultations, advocacy support, and connections with legal advocates where needed. In addition, Microcredit Montreal's approach is very relationship-based and community-oriented, with strong attention to creating safe and supportive environments for participants. Each cohort is encouraged to build community through peer networks, WhatsApp groups, and ongoing mutual support.

Conclusion

A key trend across local and provincial programs is the strong integration of wraparound support alongside financing. Local organizations often go further by tailoring support to community realities and individual circumstances while relying less on specific programs for e.g. Black or Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Local initiatives are also more likely to acknowledge non-linear entrepreneurial pathways, including home-based businesses, side hustles and part-time entrepreneurship.

Overall, the provincial and local microloan landscape demonstrates that more flexible, inclusive, and relationship-based financing models already exist across Canada. These programs show alternatives to traditional banking by focusing less on financial indicators but rather character-based lending. They often include mentorship, practical support and community involvement, recognizing diverse entrepreneurial realities.

At the same time, significant gaps remain for survivors of economic abuse and gender-based violence, as very few programs explicitly address trauma, safety concerns, coercive debt, or the long-term financial instability associated with abuse.

Promising inclusive practices already exist across Canada, including flexible credit assessment, mentorship, peer support, community based delivery, and relationship based lending. However, these practices remain fragmented, uneven by geography, and not yet consistently built around the realities of economic abuse. The gap is not simply a lack of programs but a lack of survivor- specific design standards that clearly address coerced debt, interrupted income, privacy, safety planning, flexible documentation, repayment risk, and trauma informed support.

International Best practice examples

On a global scale, the landscape of microloan and entrepreneurship support for survivors of domestic violence and financial abuse is limited and fragmented. Most survivor-specific financial programs focus on credit rebuilding and financial recovery, such as small, credit-building loans or structured repayment programs, rather than business creation. Entrepreneurship-focused initiatives for survivors tend to emphasize training, mentorship, and business readiness, but rarely include direct lending or start-up capital.

Existing microloan programs are more commonly delivered through general women-focused microfinance or community lending institutions, which may indirectly reach survivors due to flexible credit criteria and wraparound support, but are not explicitly designed for this population.

In contrast, most dedicated entrepreneurship microfinance programs for survivors of intimate partner violence operate in development cooperation contexts in lower-income countries, where women's microenterprise lending is more established and often integrated with poverty reduction or gender-based violence strategies.

The Empowering Adult Survivors of domestic violence through Entrepreneurship (EASE) is an EU-funded initiative that supports survivors of domestic violence in rebuilding their lives through entrepreneurship training, mentoring, and business development support. It provides structured training programs that help participants develop entrepreneurial skills, build business plans, and gain confidence and economic independence, with pilots implemented across several European countries.

While not offering microloans, EASE focuses on skills development and guided reintegration into work and entrepreneurship, aiming to support survivors in achieving long-term financial autonomy.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) Independence Program is a U.S.-based microloan initiative designed specifically to support survivors of economic abuse to rebuild or establish their credit. Participants work with a domestic violence advocate to complete a budget and repayment plan before receiving initial loans starting at $100 USD with the possibility of larger follow-up loans. Repayments are then reported to credit bureaus which in turn strengthen their credit history over time. Hence, the program focuses solely on improving survivors' financial recovery rather than offering microloans for entrepreneurship.

However, it is often highlighted as a best practice example on microloans for survivors that is trauma-informed and based on the lived realities of those who experience/d economic abuse.

Overall, there is a clear gap between survivor support systems and entrepreneurship financing. Survivors are often supported either in financial stabilization or in business training, but rarely in a coordinated pathway that combines trauma-informed lending with entrepreneurship development in a targeted way.

These international examples show both promising practice and a clear gap. Canada has an opportunity to lead by building one of the first integrated survivor entrepreneurship and safe capital models linked to economic abuse policy, women entrepreneurship strategy, financial inclusion, and financial sector reform. Rather than treating survivor financial recovery, credit rebuilding, entrepreneurship training, and access to capital as separate issues, Canada can develop a coordinated model that brings these supports together around safety, dignity, flexible repayment, trauma informed practice, and long term economic independence.

A model for a survivor-centred, trauma- and violence-informed microloan entrepreneurship program

A survivor-centred, trauma- and violence-informed microloan entrepreneurship program should provide accessible, flexible, and empowering pathways for survivors to start or grow businesses as a means of achieving economic security and independence.

Eligibility criteria

Instead of relying solely on traditional lending criteria, the program should consider a broader set of indicators when assessing the likelihood of loan repayment. This includes accounting for survivor-specific circumstances, such as coerced debt or other personal debt that may be a direct consequence of economic abuse and not reflective of an individual's actual creditworthiness. Eligibility criteria could include

- self-identification as a survivor
- a viable business idea and income-generating potential
- demonstrated readiness and commitment to achieving business goals
- Entrepreneur skills

Loan amounts, interest rates and repayment structures

Recognizing that many entrepreneurs require only modest capital to launch a business, the program could offer low-barrier start-up loans ranging from approximately $500 to $5,000, with opportunities to access larger growth loans as businesses become established.

To minimize financial risk and support long-term success, loans should be offered at 0% interest where possible, or at least at rates significantly below subprime lending thresholds.

The program should also ensure clear and transparent information on all fees and the full cost of borrowing. It should include safeguards to prevent harmful or aggressive collection practices, so that repayment challenges are addressed through clear and respectful processes rather than punitive or distressing approaches. This helps reduce the risk of additional financial harm or credit damage and avoids retraumatization of survivors.

Repayment structures should be flexible and responsive to survivors' circumstances, including

- grace periods before repayment begins;
- temporary payment pauses;
- no compounding interest;
- no penalties for early repayment.

Wraparound business development support

The program should integrate comprehensive business development support such as access to

- entrepreneurship coaching;
- mentorship from other entrepreneurs;
- bookkeeping and tax literacy training;
- marketing and pricing guidance;
- Peer support and community building;
- opportunities to build professional networks.

In addition, a trauma- and violence-informed approach should also include

- economic abuse-informed financial education;
- credit counselling specifically around coerced debt;
- safety planning related to business visibility and digital presence;
- mental health supports that acknowledge the impact of trauma on entrepreneurship and business ownership.

Intersectionality

A survivor-centred, trauma- and violence-informed microloan entrepreneurship program should also ensure diversity among staff involved in both loan decision-making and the delivery of wraparound support. This includes providing training that is culturally sensitive and responsive to intersectional experiences, as well as fostering intersectional networking spaces that enable peer connection, mentorship, and community-building. These spaces should not only help participants feel seen and supported, but also improve evaluators' understanding of diverse business models and reduce legitimacy gaps that survivors and other women entrepreneurs with diverse backgrounds currently face.

By combining accessible financing with tailored wraparound supports, the program can help survivors build sustainable businesses, strengthen their financial resilience, and create pathways to long-term economic empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments

- Coordinate federal efforts between Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) and Women And Gender Equality (WAGE) and regional development agencies to embed survivor entrepreneurship and microloan initiatives within existing strategies such as the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES), The National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, and broader economic empowerment and financial inclusion initiatives that combine access to capital, credit rebuilding, business training, and wraparound support.

- Increase funding for community-based women's enterprise organizations, peer lending models, and local partner organizations that support survivors and other underserved communities in their pursuit of entrepreneurship. This also includes easing restrictions for front line organizations to use funding for third-party loan programs for survivors.

- Expand government entrepreneurship policies that are currently focused primarily on incorporated businesses to explicitly include self-employed women entrepreneurs, recognizing that the majority of women entrepreneurs (86.4%) are self-employed rather than majority owners of SMEs. [WEKH]

- Strengthen income security for women entrepreneurs and survivors of economic abuse by integrating small business and self-employment policy with social protection systems, including the development of portable benefits or a tax credit for self-employed individuals. This would help address gaps in access to health, dental, disability, and mental health coverage that are typically tied to traditional employment and often unavailable to early-stage or financially vulnerable entrepreneurs. Embedding such measures within federal and provincial small business support frameworks would reduce financial precarity, support business continuity during periods of instability, and help prevent burnout and business closure among women-owned and survivor-led enterprises.

- Develop transparent, centralized portals at all levels of government that clearly list available grants, loans, and entrepreneurship funding programs, with simple, upfront eligibility criteria and quick screening tools that surface potential fit early and avoid hidden or late-stage requirements. Strengthen information dissemination to gender-based violence organizations and other social service providers.

- Improve Statistics Canada's entrepreneurship data collection by better capturing business ownership and financing outcomes across diverse populations and collecting more comprehensive data on access to capital and financing barriers faced by equity-deserving groups. Any data collection on survivor entrepreneurs should pay particular attention to their safety, confidentiality, and informed consent.

- Introduce more flexible application timelines, deadlines, administrative requirements and less paper work within entrepreneurship funding programs, particularly for underserved entrepreneurs such as survivors, to better reflect fluctuating capacity and reduce exclusion due to rigid or time-sensitive processes.

Financial Institutions and Lenders

- Develop low-barrier microloan products for survivors and economically marginalized entrepreneurs that reduce reliance on traditional credit scores and instead incorporate other indicators of risk assessment determining the likelihood of repaying a loan, alongside flexible repayment structures and small starter loans.

- Implement mechanisms to mitigate bias in application and approval processes. Diversify lending and decision-making teams to better reflect the communities they serve and improve understanding of diverse business models, lived experiences, and entrepreneurship pathways.

- Strengthen oversight and accountability for AI-enabled lending decisions. Lenders that use AI-assisted credit assessments should strengthen existing AI governance frameworks by incorporating particularly vulnerable consumer perspectives, including survivors, and conducting regular reviews to identify and mitigate potential gender, racial, and other biases. Human oversight and transparent review processes should accompany automated lending decisions to help prevent the reinforcement of existing inequities while also recognizing that indicators such as damaged credit, interrupted income, or high debt may reflect the impacts of economic abuse rather than an individual's creditworthiness.

- Partner with community and women's organizations to provide wraparound support alongside lending, including mentorship, financial literacy, and business coaching.

- Improve staff training on financial abuse, gender-based violence, economic vulnerability, and trauma-informed service delivery to reduce stigma and improve accessibility for survivors, ensuring frontline staff can better recognize and respond to the financial realities of economic abuse. As financial institutions implement the future Code of Conduct on the Prevention of Economic Abuse, they should embed these considerations into lending practices and decision-making processes, with a specific focus on maintaining and improving access to credit and microloans for survivors pursuing entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Community Organizations and Entrepreneurship Support Providers

- Develop trauma-informed entrepreneurship pathways that combine financial recovery, credit rebuilding, entrepreneurship training, mentorship, and access to capital for survivors within a survivor-centred approach that is trauma- and violence-informed, taking into account the unique challenges and experiences survivors may face in entrepreneurship.

- Expand peer lending and community-based entrepreneurship models that are trauma-informed and survivor-driven, aimed at building confidence, social support, and business readiness alongside access to financing. They should integrate wraparound support services such as access to social workers, psychological support, and other relevant community services to address the broader impacts of trauma and economic abuse, while strengthening entrepreneurship outcomes. In addition, these models should prioritize confidentiality, survivor choice, and voluntary participation, ensuring that survivors are never expected to disclose personal experiences or trauma within peer circles or in order to access support.

- Strengthen partnerships with financial institutions and government programs to improve referral systems and coordinated support for survivors interested in self-employment or entrepreneurship.

- Advocate for survivor-informed entrepreneurship policies and collect disaggregated data on barriers survivors face in accessing business financing and self-employment opportunities.

A National Call to Action

Canada has an opportunity to lead in building a safer and more inclusive approach to survivor entrepreneurship and access to capital.

People with experiences of economic abuse should not be excluded from financial opportunity because their credit history, income, documentation, or business pathway reflects coercion, control, and systemic barriers. These realities have to be recognized as economic justice and financial inclusion issues, not individual failure.

Safe capital must become part of Canada's broader policy agenda on women's entrepreneurship, gender-based violence prevention, financial inclusion, anti-fraud, and inclusive economic growth. This requires coordinated action from governments, financial institutions, credit unions, lenders, funders, entrepreneurship programs, and community organizations.

The path forward requires systems that assess risk fairly, protect safety, and create real opportunity. Survivors deserve access not only to capital, but to safe capital that supports dignity, choice, recovery, and long-term economic independence.

Conclusion

Overall, this report demonstrates that survivors of gender-based violence and economic abuse face structural and compounding barriers within Canada's financial and entrepreneurial systems.

Traditional lending environments remain largely misaligned with their realities, with strict requirements related to credit history, income stability, business formalization, and documentation effectively excluding many individuals who are rebuilding financial autonomy after experiencing economic abuse. The current credit-based risk indicators used to assess repayment capacity don't account for survivors' experiences of coerced debt, interrupted income, damaged credit, or limited financial assets as direct consequence of economic abuse. These factors are then often misread as personal financial failure, rather than downstream effects of victimization and gaps in institutional recognition of signs of economic abuse within lending systems.

These barriers are further intensified by intersecting forms of discrimination linked to gender, race, immigration status, disability, and other identities, contributing to low trust in financial institutions in addition to a widespread perception that capital is not accessible to "people like me." As a result, none of the 24 survivor entrepreneurs of CCFWE's sharing circles even attempted to access formal financing at all, relying instead on personal savings or informal networks, which can increase new financial dependence.

At the same time, the environmental scan of existing microloan programs shows that Canada's microloan ecosystem is gradually shifting toward more inclusive and relationship-based models of financing. Across both national and provincial and local programs, there is growing recognition of the need to reduce reliance on credit scores and strengthen wraparound support such as mentorship, coaching, financial literacy, and community-based accompaniment.

However, despite these positive developments, few programs explicitly account for the realities of economic abuse, trauma, or coercive debt, and eligibility frameworks still largely prioritize formal business readiness, stable immigration and credit profiles. This highlights a critical gap between existing support and survivor needs, underscoring the importance of developing trauma- and violence-informed financial models that integrate flexible capital access with long-term, trust-based support systems capable of responding to the lived experiences of survivor entrepreneurs.

I have met survivors who carry business ideas in one hand and the financial harm of abuse in the other. They are trying to build while repairing credit they did not damage alone, paying debts they did not freely choose, raising children, finding safety, and rebuilding confidence after years of control.

Survivor entrepreneurs are not asking for pity. They are asking for a fair chance. They are asking for capital that is safe, programs that understand trauma, and lenders that can see potential beyond a credit score.

When we invest in survivor entrepreneurs, we are not only funding businesses. We are helping rebuild lives, families, communities, and futures.

Meseret Haileyesus
Founder and CEO, Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment

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Appendix A

Environmental Scan Summary of loan programs

Non-profits	Commercial Banks	Credit Unions	Non-loans programs and alternative financial institutions	Fintechs
Loans or microloans for women entrepreneur	Personal loans, microloans, small business loans for start-ups	Women, entrepreneurs, small businesses	Women, entrepreneurs, black entrepreneurs, low-income individuals	Small business loans, personal loans
$500 - $200,000	$3,000 - $1,000,000	$200 - $500,000	$1,000 - $50,000	$200 - $800,000
Up to 5 years payment terms	1 – 5-year term	1 – 5-year term	Up to 5 years payment terms	1 – 5-year term
Existing Prime rate + 2% to 5%	Existing Prime rate +/- % points	Existing Prime rate +/- % points	The rate is set by each organization	Information is not available
One-time fee	Information is not available	Information is not available	One-time fee	Information is not available
Credit score, being a citizen, refugee or permanent resident, live within the region.	Being a registered business, credit score, proof of income, have a bank account, cash flow projection, business plan.	Proof of income, being in business for a year, credit score, have a bank account, cash flow projection, business plan.	Proof of income, being self-employed or registered business, being a previous client, credit score, being a citizen, refugee or permanent resident, cash flow projection, business plan.	Proof of income, being in business for 6 months, credit score.