

# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CANADIAN WOMEN TO REGENERATIVE TOURISM THROUGH TOURISM SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

## Case Study

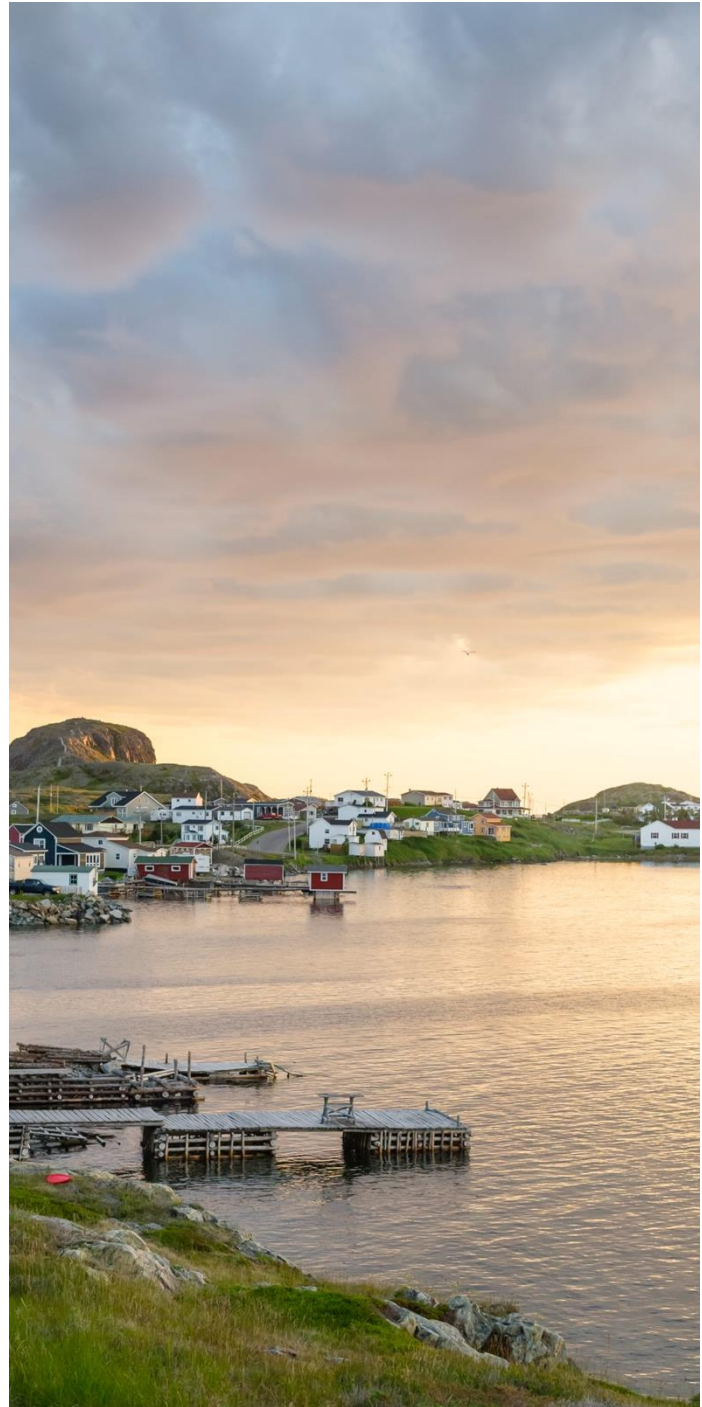
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# INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurs leverage their creativity to fill market gaps, respond to societal needs and/or take action on government deficiencies. Tourism Social Entrepreneurs (TSEs) are change agents in their communities, providing education about responsible business practices, advocating for local interests, operating accountably and supporting local procurement.

In the State of Women's Entrepreneurship (SOWE) in Canada 2023 annual report<sup>1</sup>, the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) estimated that only 18% of businesses in Canada are majority-owned by women. The report reveals that many of the barriers to women's engagement in entrepreneurship are associated with "Bro Culture" reflected by cultural stereotypes, lack of role models, inadequate mentoring, limited opportunities for funding and generally a lack of female-friendly training. Additionally, the 2022-2023 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report<sup>2</sup> shows that Established Business Ownership (EBO) is typically more dominated by men than new entrepreneurship, which could suggest that women's entrepreneurship is a more recent phenomenon than men's entrepreneurship or that women-owned businesses have lower survival rates than those owned by men. The GEM report also states that over 37% of entrepreneurs find it difficult to open a business.



<sup>1</sup> The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Canada 2023: Research Preview. Retrieved from: <https://wekh.ca/research/the-state-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-canada-2023-research-preview/>

<sup>2</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM). (2021). 2020/2021/2022 Global Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.gemconsortium.org/reports/latest-global-report>

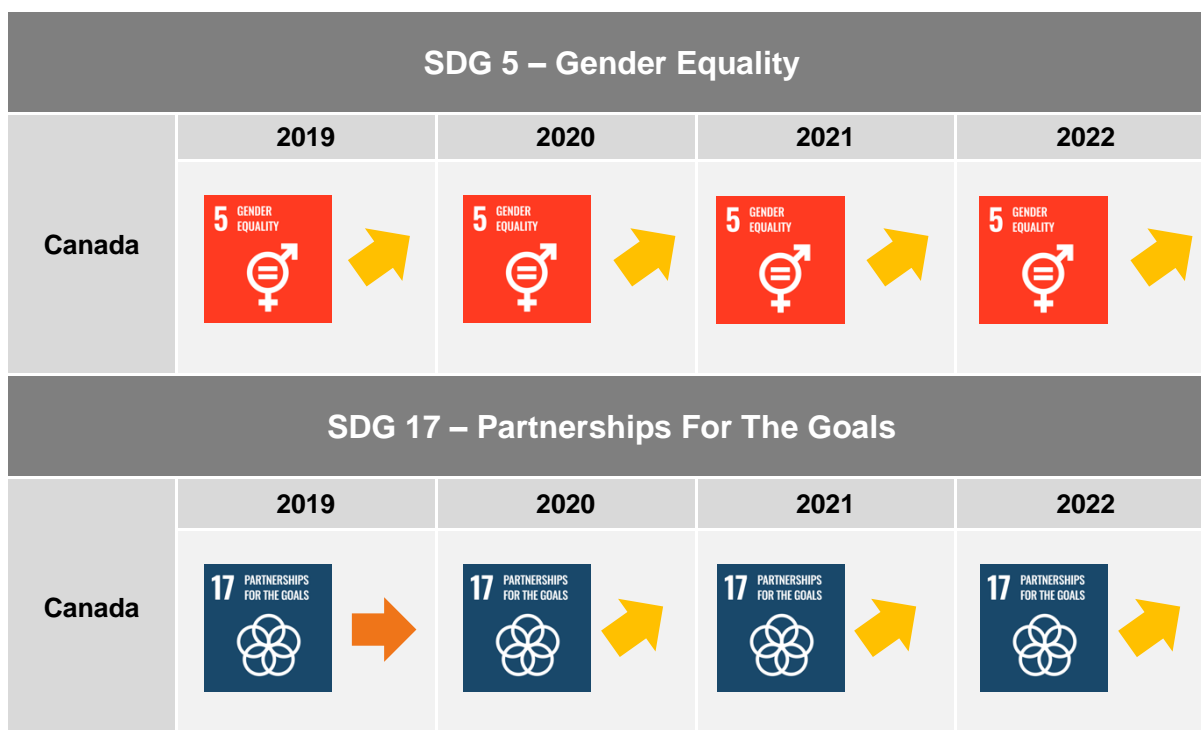


Increasing the number of women-owned businesses is necessary as research shows women play an important role in contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Canada has been slow to support gender equity and the pandemic has increased gender inequities, slowing partnership progress (see Figure 1). Importantly, women entrepreneurs have been recognized as essential change agents and can support community wellbeing through their businesses. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of women TSEs and the support they need to start and grow their businesses to enhance gender equity in Canada. Enhancing equity supports for women-owned businesses may progress Gender Equality (SDG5) and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG17)<sup>3</sup>.

In Figure 1, the orange arrows mean ‘significant challenges remain’ and the red arrow means ‘major challenges remain’ in achieving the particular SDG. An upward arrow indicates moderate improvement and a horizontal arrow indicates stagnancy.

**Figure 1**  
Canada’s response to progressing SDGs 5 and 17

- SDG Achieved
- Challenges remain
- Significant Challenges remain
- Major Challenges remain



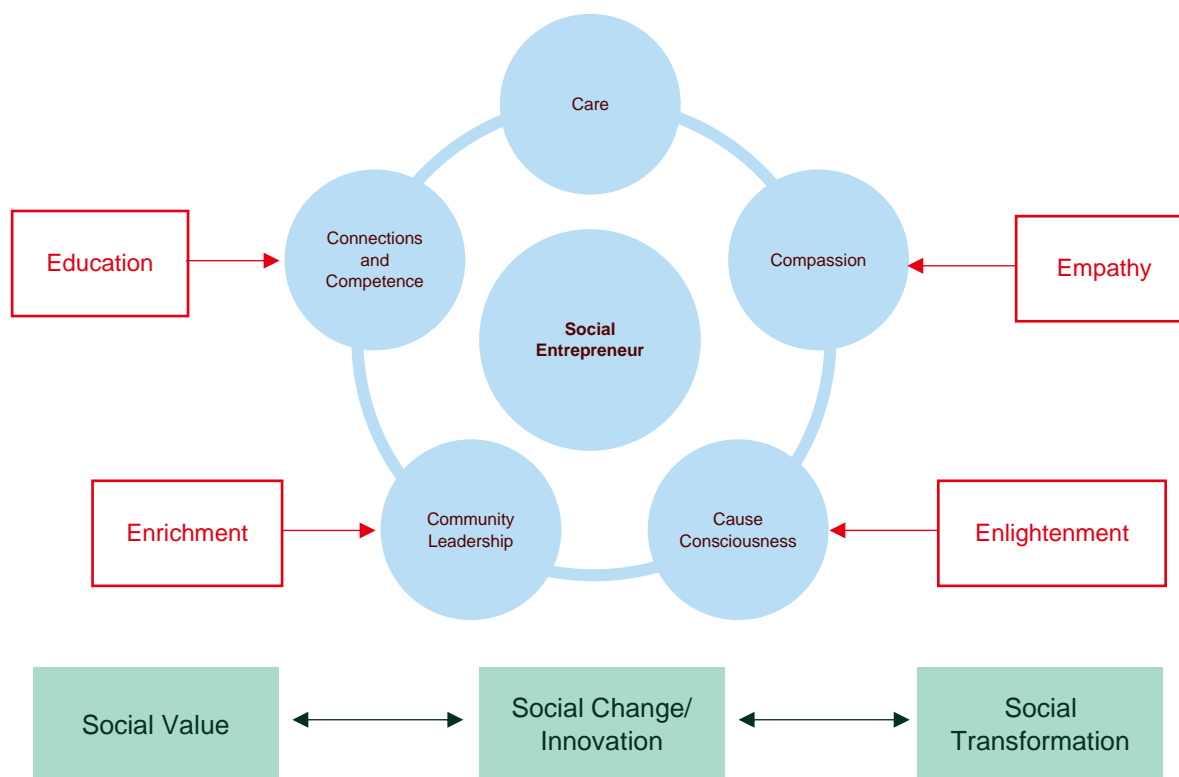
<sup>3</sup> To learn more about the 17 SDGs, please see <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> and to learn about how Canada is performing <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/map/goals/SDG5>

# REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Regenerative tourism encourages connection and care between businesses and the natural world, in contrast to the fragmented way tourism is currently practiced. Regenerative development brings together social and ecological components to evolve and thrive together under a holistic approach. This approach is rooted in a mindset which supports collaboration, environmental ethics and stewardship. By adopting a regenerative approach, we emphasize restoring what has previously been damaged. Importantly, regenerative tourism centres human–ecological relationships and as such, seeks inspiration from Indigenous worldviews that are based on care, reciprocity, relationality, respect, stewardship and reverence for the land.

In the case of regenerative tourism, the emphasis lies in community engagement focused on creating and designing tourism together to bring improvements to destination communities. Regenerative tourism is a values-led approach that advocates leaving a place better than you found it. This requires a shift in stakeholder mindsets, supporting taking less from the Earth and giving more to the community. To put regenerative practices into action requires meaningful and authentic dialogue, transparency and co-creating partnerships—with each other and with other living systems.

**Figure 2**  
*The role of Tourism Social Entrepreneurs*



# WOMEN TSEs CONTRIBUTING TO REGENERATIVE PRACTICES IN CANADA



Women TSEs play a crucial role in contributing to regenerative practices in Canada<sup>4</sup>, but there are few studies in the TSE literature that recognize the agency of women and their role in progressing sustainability and regenerative tourism. Because of this research gap, much is still unknown about the experiences of women TSEs and the support they need to thrive.

The case study presented here is by scholars in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. It is part of a broader research program, supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant (2019-2023) and Early Researcher Award (2023-2028) to examine how TSEs are advancing Agenda 2030 and better understanding the barriers women and other equity-deserving TSEs experience. The goal of this work is to enhance formal and informal supports that may enable women and other equity-deserving groups to engage in social entrepreneurship in tourism. The following pages describe the University of Waterloo's research program and its findings.

<sup>4</sup> Boluk, K. A., & Panse, G. (2022). Recognising the regenerative impacts of Canadian women tourism social entrepreneurs through a feminist ethic of care lens. *Journal of Tourism Futures*, 8(3), 352-366.

Boluk, K. A., Panse, G., & Jeon, S. E. (2023). Exploring the regenerative practices of Canadian women tourism social entrepreneurs: a feminist ethic of care. In *Handbook on Tourism and Rural Community Development* (pp. 373-385). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Panse and Boluk (forthcoming). *Gender equity and women tourism social entrepreneurs*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

# THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

The program recruited 36 women operating social enterprises in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. These social enterprises included restaurants, events businesses, caterers and bakeries. General questions sought to understand why the entrepreneurs started their businesses, what kind of sustainability activities they engaged in, how the entrepreneurs work with their communities, what barriers they face, their ideas around support required and their visions for the future. The first phase of interviews were conducted between May and July 2021 and lasted between 50 and 75 minutes. We adopted an ethics of care approach and designed the research to understand the lived experiences of our informants. The second phase of our project will focus specifically on the experiences of equity-deserving tech TSEs, to understand their contributions to the SDGs and regenerative futures and equity supports required. Our analysis highlighting contributions to a regenerative and equitable tourism future is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Contribution of Women Tourism Social Entrepreneurs towards regenerative and just tourism futures*





# HOW ARE WOMEN DELIVERING SOCIAL VALUE?



## Embodying the Regenerative Tourism

One notable way to drive change is to lead the process of change. The analysis revealed these women entrepreneurs believed in sustainability and regenerative practices on a personal level, and such beliefs and values were reflected in how they conducted their businesses, with an emphasis on enhancing community well-being. Specifically, there was intentionality in the way they interacted with colleagues and staff, suppliers and their environments, as well as in the choices they made when developing products, sourcing and buying raw materials, and serving customers, which demonstrated regenerative practices. Some women entrepreneurs engaged in these practices by partnering with sustainable or Indigenous-owned suppliers, offering customers high-quality sustainable products and using local produce.

A commitment to enhancing well-being was also reflected in the way the women entrepreneurs provide support for

employees, such as scholarships and training for professional development, fostering inclusivity and creating safe spaces for the LGBTQ2+ communities, providing safe and healthy choices for those with food allergies, supporting local, organic, Indigenous and/or Fairtrade suppliers. Two of the participants described efforts to enhance well-being through their businesses, such as programs offering food to people experiencing homelessness in the community. Another initiated a weekly food distribution program during the COVID-19 lockdowns to ensure 250 children from a marginalized community had access to healthy meals. Many participants shared the importance of working with likeminded suppliers who share similar values regarding distributing profits and earning opportunities within communities.

## Supporting ‘Real’ Food Consumption



Many of the women’s enterprises emerged from personal concerns about food sustainability, the ecological origins of products and personal decisions to prioritize organic products for their families. Notably, all participants expressed concerns about food production, genetically-modified products, mistreatment of animals and the mass distribution of food. Recognizing the harm created by commercial animal farming led several women to seek out partnerships with local farms to procure meat and/or produce. Such partnerships grew out of a mutual interest in ensuring the well-being of the animals they procured and providing the best quality products to their clients. Participants demonstrated making informed decisions, showing care within—and well beyond—their communities, supporting the supply of ‘real’ food and addressing their concerns about contemporary food production.

The women entrepreneurs are also committed to enhancing communities from an environmental standpoint, by supporting the value chain—minimizing waste, purchasing or growing organic foods and showing care for animals.

This showed up in their alignment with networks and coalitions advocating for supporting, caring and regenerative practices. Specifically, the women TSEs partnered with a variety of networks aligning with their values to promote socio-environmental sustainability. These included:

- Beneficial Corporation (B-Corp) certification
- Women’s Legal Education & Action Fund (LEAF) certification
- Feast On certification, managed by the Culinary Tourism Alliance, to encourage businesses to source and serve local Ontario-grown food
- Living Wage Employer recognition by the Ontario Living Wage Network (OLWN), which advocates for decent work standards for all Ontario workers

The entrepreneurs also financially supported networks, such as the Canadian Biotechnology Action *Network*, which promotes food sovereignty and advocates against genetically-modified food, and the Fair Kitchens Movement, which advocates for more equitable food services.



## Educating for Regenerative Futures



To facilitate regenerative practices and the potential for positive future impacts, education emerged as a major influence on the entrepreneurs' interactions with staff, customers and the broader community—including younger generations—where they operated their businesses. Such education and training were in reference to the quality of ingredients they used, decisions to support natural food production, the connection between food consumption and overall health, engaging with children, supporting inclusive workplaces and equity, furthering their employees' education and professional development, and providing ways to support their staff's mental health. Accordingly, interest and concern for the education of future generations were important to the entrepreneurs' philosophies.

The women facilitated education and knowledge sharing in the community—including staff, customers and partners—and focused on transformation and change. This education took the shape of both informal (such as in-store customer interactions to increase knowledge about the sourcing of products and their health benefits, and communication with suppliers) and formal methods (such as employee equity training and youth food programming). The establishment of a non-profit organization promoting mental health supports and employee well-being in the hospitality sector during a pandemic is another example of formal support for employees that shows the entrepreneurs' commitment to reviving industry practices in general.

# KEY LEARNINGS

The analysis illustrates a need for increased focus on tourism social entrepreneurship that recognizes the agency of women and other equity-deserving groups attending to their role in contributing to regenerative tourism futures. While many participants were unaware of the UN SDGs, all were contributing to the progression of many of the goals. It is imperative that we focus on education and increasing awareness of the SDGs among the public, as well as enabling women TSEs to support intentional SDG progress.

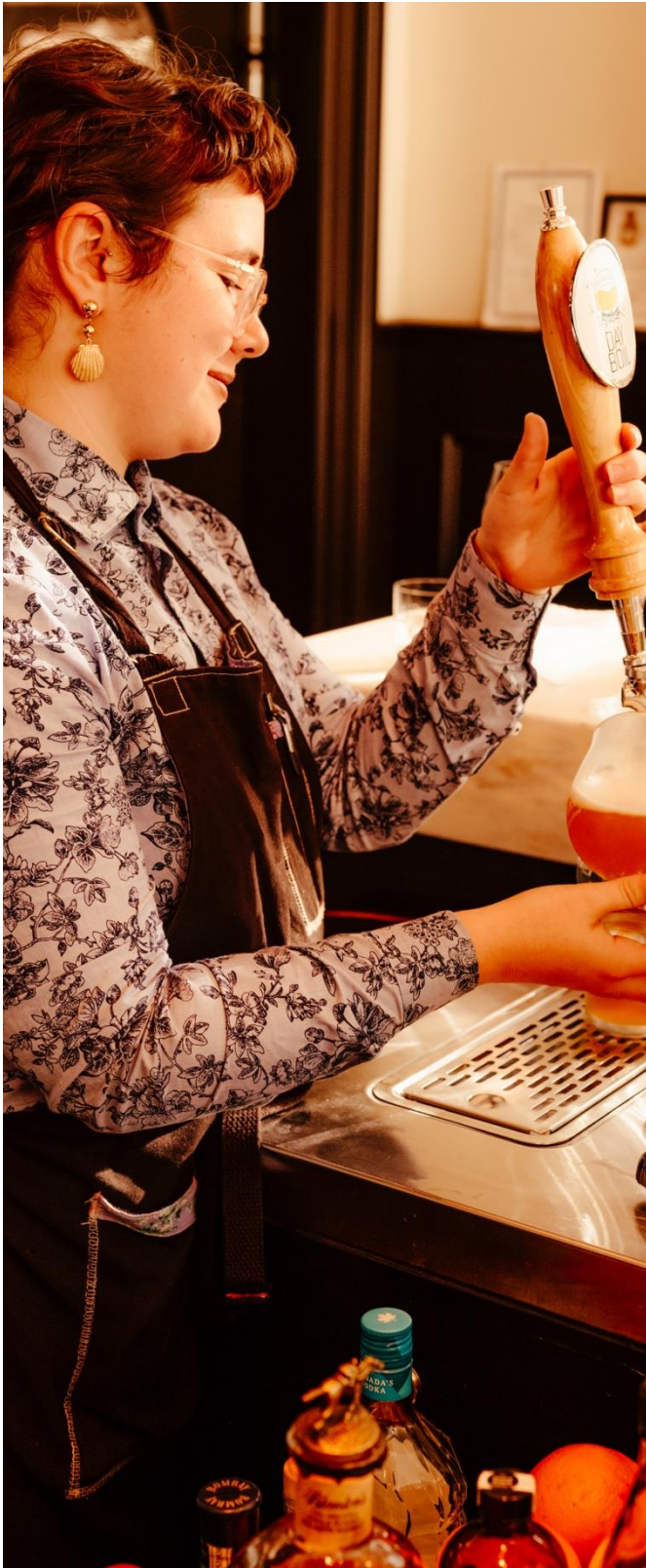
Broadly, the analysis demonstrates women TSEs deliver social value by:

- Fostering environmentally-friendly business practices
- Combatting social inequities by focusing on equity-deserving individuals
- Educating employees, consumers and the supply-chain on regenerative practices
- Giving back and enhancing the social fabric of their communities
- Making business decisions in consideration of future generations

Women TSEs' principles and values manifested in deliberate business actions. Their principles affected how they interacted with co-workers, employees, suppliers and their surroundings, as well as the specific choices they made while creating and sourcing their products, ingredients and raw materials. All participants demonstrated a desire to enhance their communities by offering opportunities for training, focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion, and emphasizing the importance of relationality and respect for all living beings.







Policy supports for equity-deserving social entrepreneurs are important. Specific supports might include improved access to grant funding, tax breaks and government subsidies, to ensure TSEs are not penalized for implementing sustainable practices and embracing a regenerative mindset. Additionally, more educational resources are needed that encompass social entrepreneurship, the SDGs, business management and mentoring opportunities. Informal factors such as a lack of women role models or the lack of a strong networking system have a high impact in determining the success of women entrepreneurs. This is also important for the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem that facilitates incubation and impact funding for social entrepreneurs.

It is clear that women TSEs bridge the gap between sustainability, justice and development, as they support communities by not only creating economic opportunities for themselves, but building values-based businesses promoting a 'for-purpose' economy rather than a 'for-profit' market. This case study shows how tourism could be more inclusive and contribute to progressing SDG5 Gender Equality, while focusing on creating pathways for women to continue to make tangible and meaningful contributions to their communities.