



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

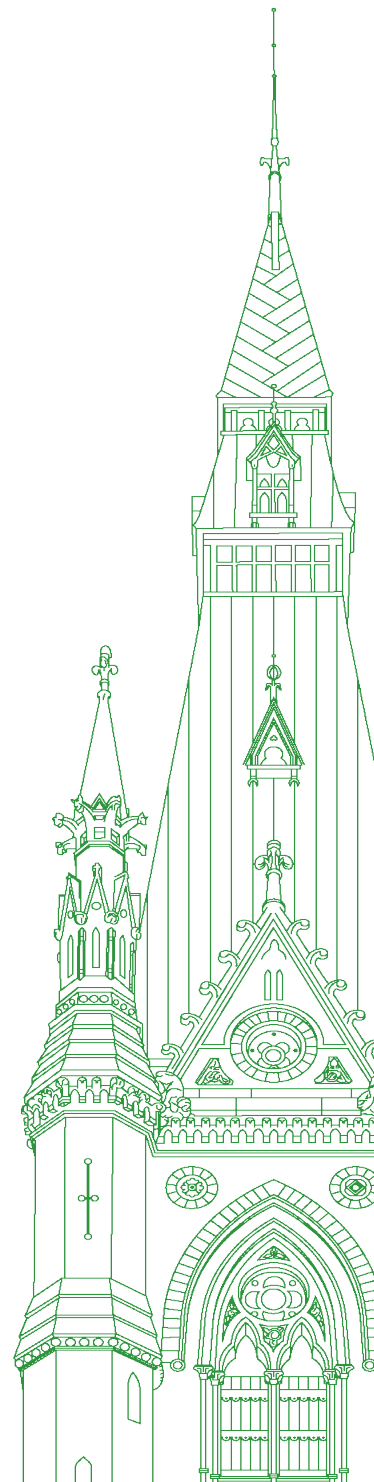
Standing Committee on International Trade

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 124

Wednesday, October 30, 2024

Chair: The Honourable Judy A. Sgro



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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This is meeting number 124 of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, September 16, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of Canadian women in international trade.

Before I introduce the witnesses, I just have to mention to the committee that we have a photographer booked for November 4, which is Monday's meeting, if that's okay with everybody. Come looking as great as you always look.

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Do we have to smile, too?

The Chair: It helps.

We'll have a photo. It's something that's usually done once a year, so we'll have that done.

On November 4, which is Monday, we have the softwood lumber study. November 6 will be draft report consideration of the supply chain study and the seafood study.

We have two informal meeting requests that the clerk sent out to all members of the committee for your thoughts. NASCO—which is the North American Strategy for Competitiveness Network—is visiting Ottawa. They've asked to meet with us for an hour on November 18.

There's a delegation from Colombia that has asked to meet with the committee on November 20 for an hour.

Is it okay with the committee if we have them come to the committee for the second hour on November 18 and the second hour on November 20?

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Chair, may I?

Again, as we mentioned to the delegation from Ecuador, the committee time is limited. If it is of strategic value for the committee in the near to medium term, then we should give the committee hours. If not, there can be an informal meeting elsewhere.

The Chair: What's the feeling of the committee?

Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Personally, I agree that we should hear from these people, despite the topics we had already agreed to study. It's not every day that delegations tell us they are interested in coming to talk about certain subjects. They will be visiting Ottawa before going back to Colombia. I think it makes sense.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): I agree with my colleagues that if they're going to be present here.... We've heard that they have important issues. If they're requesting to meet with us, I'd say it's quite imperative.

Of course, I do take into consideration Mr. Arya's concerns about timing.

Madam Chair, I'd leave it to you and your recommendation to suggest whether or not we have time.

I'd imagine, since you're posing the question, that we would have time.

The Chair: It's been worked into the calendar with the clerk, if the committee wants to go forward.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: That's very good.

Mr. Ryan Williams (Bay of Quinte, CPC): Madam Chair, I think we agree that you have a day to manage the reports that we have. If you feel that we're going to be here anyhow and we can fit this group in if they're here, then I think we give that to you.

Obviously, we wouldn't want to take away from a day or any future days where we have important meetings, but if that's a day you can fill, why not? Let's do it.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If the calendar avails itself, as suggested by the clerk, we will go forward on the second hour. We'll have the first hour of our regular business and we will allow them the second hour, if we feel a whole hour is necessary.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls, CPC): Madam Chair, I apologize, but I just want to ask now, because I'm not aware of the group that's making this request.

The Chair: It's NASCO, which is the North American Strategy for Competitiveness Network.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Okay.

The Chair: Are we all right?

To our witnesses, I apologize for a few minutes of delay.

We have with us today, from the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Christine Nakamura, vice-president, central Canada office, by video conference.

From Invest Ottawa, we have Sonya Shorey, president and chief executive officer, also by video conference.

We welcome you both to the committee.

We will start with opening remarks and then proceed with rounds of questions. You have up to five minutes.

Ms. Nakamura, would you like to start, please?

Ms. Christine Nakamura (Vice-President, Central Canada Office, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Asia Pacific Foundation is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to strengthening ties with Asia through research, education and convening activities to facilitate connections between Canadians and counterparts in the Indo-Pacific.

Studies have shown that advancing gender equality and increasing women's economic engagement in Canada could potentially add \$150 billion in incremental GDP by 2026. This projection prompted our team to see how our expertise on Asia could contribute to intensifying women's participation in the economy, and particularly those who lead small and medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs.

In 2017, SMEs accounted for about 99.8% of all employer businesses in Canada. However, only 15.6% of the total were majority women-owned, and of these, only 11.1% exported. To help grow the number of women SMEs who export, we launched the women's business missions series to Asia in 2019 to facilitate introductions of Canadian women entrepreneurs to potential business partners in the burgeoning markets of Asia. From 2017 to 2018 we spoke to over 300 women in business across Canada, who told us that they lacked the confidence to tackle the culturally diverse and unknown markets of Asia. They did, however, conclude that if introductions, facilitated through trade missions dedicated to women, could be arranged by agents experienced in navigating these markets, they would attempt market entry.

In spring 2019 we led a pilot mission to Japan, with women entrepreneurs in health tech who specialized in elder care, to address the needs of Japan's aged society. The results included NDAs and MOUs to collaborate on R and D, and agreements for product localization and distribution. Discussions are still under way, which is a good indication that there will be more outcomes in the future.

In summer 2019 we were selected to receive funding from the women's entrepreneurship strategy ecosystem fund, enabling us to lead another six successive missions to key markets in the Indo-Pacific from 2020 to 2023. As expected, our two in-person missions after COVID generated the majority of the outcomes so far, but soon we will embark on our eighth mission to Taiwan and Vietnam.

With WES funding we also created the Canadian Women's International Network, or CanWIN, a spinoff of our trade missions to further support women SMEs. CanWIN offers a powerful network of global connections that provide necessary supports to women in international trade.

This year, on Canada's National Indigenous Peoples Day, we hosted CanWIN's inaugural global summit in Toronto, bringing together over 150 women and gender-diverse participants from across Canada and seven economies in the Indo-Pacific to network and share best practices. We featured a special panel of indigenous business leaders from member economies of the Indigenous Peoples Economic and Trade Cooperation Arrangement, or IPETCA. We also spotlighted award-winning next-generation entrepreneurs from Canada and staged a pitch competition for five talented Canadian finalists in front of an international jury of investors.

To date, 212 women and gender-diverse participants, including business and thought leaders, participated in our seven missions, highlighting Canada's rich cultural and regional diversity; 740 tailored business-to-business meetings were curated; and almost 4,500 women and male allies engaged in our activities across Canada and Asia to advance gender economic empowerment. Our trade mission series generated a conservative estimate of about \$21.5 million Canadian in sales and investments as of August 2024, and there are close to 70 business discussions in progress.

The funding enabled us to reach out to under-represented groups of entrepreneurs and "futurepreneurs", including those who are indigenous women, women of colour and LGBTQ+, to inform them of the opportunities offered by Asian markets and to ensure inclusive representation on our delegations. Our outreach efforts also connected us to many organizations across Canada that support women's entrepreneurship, resulting in a more coordinated approach to helping women founders.

Our results are only a small sampling of what is attainable with curated support for women SMEs that export. With sustained investment, women will continue to drive Canada's economic growth in the years to come.

In closing, I make several recommendations. The first is to continue efforts to weave together independently run supports for women founders to export.

• (1640)

The second is to provide supports not only to early-stage start-ups but also to later-stage start-ups to increase export growth, because there's a gap.

The third is to follow company growth for years, not just once, because to capture accurate growth metrics, you need to continue. It takes a while for results to come out.

Lastly, expand the reach of women-focused supports across associations and chambers of intersectional minority groups.

I'll stop there, Madam Chair. Thank you for the opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Ms. Shorey for up to five minutes, please.

Ms. Sonya Shorey (President and Chief Executive Officer, Invest Ottawa): Thank you, Madam Chair and all members of the committee, for the opportunity to share the vision, progress and lessons learned from Invest Ottawa, your lead economic development agency here in Canada's capital, and all of the partners we're honoured to collaborate with.

Together, as an ecosystem, we're committed to empowering women founders, CEOs and business owners from every single walk of life to reach international markets and thrive globally.

If you see her, you can be her.

In Ottawa, we're privileged to collaborate with remarkable women founders who serve as powerful role models in Canada and for the world: Elizabeth Audette-Bourdeau, founder and CEO of Welbi, who is transforming senior care; Alida Burke, co-founder of Growcer, who is addressing food security and sustainability; Erin Kelly, CEO and founder of Advanced Symbolics, who is enabling AI decision-making; Sarah Sedgman, founder of LearnExperts, who is enabling a revolution in the trainer sector; and Heather Ward, who is president of Hyperion Global Energy, a carbon technology capture company.

These leaders are creating a triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental impact, as well as advancing UN sustainability goals.

At Invest Ottawa, when we say "women", we include all individuals who identify as women, including women of colour, transgender women and those with gender-diverse identities. These women have faced systemic barriers, and together with partners like SheBoot, the Capital Angel Network and so many others, we're committed to prioritizing equity, access and inclusion. In our programs, we are working hard to ensure everyone who accesses our support, together with our partners, feels welcomed and empowered.

Since 2017, our strategy has addressed systemic challenges facing women entrepreneurs, particularly around capital and global market access.

The data speaks volumes. Women own less than 16% of Canadian businesses, yet women-founded companies drive significant economic, social and environmental value. Our ecosystem is dedicated to amplifying and enabling this impact.

In 2018, at Invest Ottawa, we created a women founders and owners subcommittee of our board, with leaders from diverse backgrounds. We also contributed to the development of a women founders and owners strategy, a road map to make Ottawa the best city globally for women to launch, grow and scale impactful global

companies. Among our goals is to establish Ottawa's first woman-owned \$100-million company and inspire a pipeline of many more.

Our strategy revolves around four key thrusts: to promote, educate, equip and connect. This strategy has increased women's participation in our programs significantly over the last six years. In our Invest Ottawa scale-up program alone, 77% of the technology companies generating \$500,000 to \$2 million minimum in annual recurring revenue now have at least one woman founder, co-founder or senior executive. That's up from single digits, and many of these companies are now exporting globally.

Investment remains a key challenge for women founders. On Planet Earth, only 2.2% of venture capital in the first half of 2024 went to women sole founders. Mixed-founder teams fare slightly better, but the disparity is clear. For women founders from marginalized groups, venture capital is less than 1%.

It's critical to break these barriers for our economy and society. Studies consistently show that women-founded companies generate higher revenue per dollar invested, underscoring the tangible value and resilience they bring to this market.

In 2020, Invest Ottawa and the Capital Angel Network, led by Jennifer Francis, Julia Elvidge and me, created SheBoot, an investment readiness boot camp that is now national and is addressing this challenge head-on. It enables more women to get funded, and it gets more women investing. When more women are investing, more women get funded. Research demonstrates that.

Since its inception, SheBoot has helped to catalyze more than \$25 million in follow-on funding for 50 participating women founders, preparing them to attract capital and navigate the complexities of global expansion.

Join us to see our fifth cohort in action at our SheBoot pitch competition on November 12 here in Ottawa. Big applause goes to our Capital Angel Network partners, where women now comprise 30% of investor membership, a significant increase over years past.

We've also launched international women's month, another key initiative uniting 50 partners annually from within and beyond our region, across the country and around the world.

It's a long-term driver for sustainable change, not just creating a critical mass of successful women leaders here in Ottawa and beyond but also enabling us to serve as role models to inspire others.

These initiatives we are championing directly address so many of these challenges, but more is needed. We can truly make Ottawa the best city and Canada the best country for women to launch, scale and lead companies that fuel our economy and change our world for the better.

Collaboration is crucial. Reports estimate it will take 131 years to close the gender gap. We need everyone working together. We invite all people, organizations and sectors to join us.

Our work is just beginning. We have a long way to go. I truly believe that with intention, collaboration and commitment, and with all the partners across this country and so many leaders, Canada can lead and change the world.

• (1645)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Williams for six minutes, please.

Mr. Ryan Williams: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for attending today. It's really great to have you here on this important study.

Ms. Shorey, I will start with you. Thank you for representing all the entrepreneurs in Invest Ottawa, a very important organization.

With your extensive background in policy advocacy and government relations, how do you see federal taxation policies affecting Canadian women entrepreneurs involved in international trade, particularly when it comes to market access?

Ms. Sonya Shorey: When we think about taxation, we don't think about it in isolation. We think about the entire business environment, all of the policies, how they work together and how they are designed to be inclusive, to encourage and break down barriers. We would see things such as the funding available, all of the supports available, and taxation and procurement from our domestic side all working together as a suite. The more that we can do to encourage all founders, including women founders and marginalized founders, to think big, be bold and pursue big, bold dreams, certainly, the more we can do together to create the kind of environment that makes it very lucrative to stay and to grow deep roots here.

Our scale-up program is all about that. It's about how we can encourage more founders to anchor here, to make great roots and continue building and scaling and not leave for the U.S., where there are certainly some very distinct advantages.

We are working hard to collaborate with all levels of government, industry and our founder community, to encourage them to look broadly at everything we have in our policy environment. Here in Canada, we are distinct. Our culture has many critical advantages, and we have a quality of life that is second to none.

When we talk to founders, including women founders, these considerations are absolutely critical—an environment where you can raise children and grow a company that thrives, that is safe, that is

encouraging and where you can get the quality of life that you deserve. Everything operates as a suite. I don't see anything operating in isolation.

Mr. Ryan Williams: That's fantastic. I loved your quote. You said that, if there are more women entrepreneurs investing in women entrepreneurial businesses, there will be more women entrepreneurs getting invested in.

We see part of the solution to that as open banking in Canada. The Americans are closer than we are right now. They're close to getting some compliance, and they have 4,400 banks. Part of that would be seeing open banking and some of those applications go into venture capitalism, where right now we have \$6 billion of funding in Canada. To your point, only 2.2% of that worldwide goes into sole female-led enterprises. The Americans have \$200 billion.

We see that perhaps we're losing an advantage. By having open banking implemented quickly in Canada, we can make sure that we can take that advantage and hopefully see more female-led venture capital groups invest in more female-led businesses. Would you see that as an advantage from your standpoint?

• (1650)

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Again, I think everything works together as a suite. I think we need to create pathways for more women angels. It's the entire cycle of venture capital. From the earliest stages right up through the venture capital, I think certainly there are many advantages to be had, but we need to inspire more women to pursue that career path—it starts very early—and enable more women to become educated about the opportunity and the ability to invest.

There are many organizations that we collaborate with across this country. The Capital Angel Network and SheBoot are anchored here in Ottawa, but together with BDC's "Thrive" venture capital funds, StandUp Ventures, Phoenix Fire, The Firehood, Women's Equity Lab, The51 Ventures and Sandpiper Ventures are all leading by example with women who are bringing new women investors into the pipeline and creating the inspiration that enables them to see themselves as investors, which I see as one of the anchor challenges.

Before we think about all of those other advantages, we have to equip women to see themselves in those roles. We have to create pathways and make the opportunity something that's possible.

Mr. Ryan Williams: Thank you.

Ms. Nakamura, you also talked also about second-stage scale-up, getting some more funding for acceleration. It's getting from the start-up stage to the growth stage, where we can see good IP generation and development commercialization.

Can you please tell me about your ideas for seeing more acceleration of businesses that are female-led? How do we really put emphasis onto those businesses, and how does that relate to getting more of those businesses ready for international trade?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: As I mentioned, the project we're doing is primarily to introduce women entrepreneurs to growth markets in Asia. Because of our foundation, we are focused on the Asia-Pacific, so we know that in the thriving markets of Southeast Asia, in particular, as a bloc, there are tons of opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

The women we've been helping are primarily in tech and health tech, ICT, and clean technology. Those three areas are the main sectors that we've been able to introduce to growth markets in Asia.

Quite frankly, on the opportunities in Asia, if we hadn't talked to these women and started this project, lots of women entrepreneurs wouldn't even have thought to try to access or do market entry in those areas. This is why we're doing this project, because, as I mentioned, the two in-person missions we've conducted so far have already resulted in almost 22 million dollars' worth of deals. That is something they wouldn't have had if they were here in Canada.

That's one thing, but I can tell you that there is a lot of non-dilutive, early-stage funding in Canada, as I mentioned, but when they get to series A or series B, they have a lot of trouble. They have to look outside Canada. We really have to, as a group, work together to try to improve that situation.

Another project that we're working on is an investor session. We've been networking with investors throughout Asia, and in February 2024, at the Canada and Asia conference in Singapore that we held, we brought together 40 investors from throughout Asia to come together as a group. We pitched five women entrepreneurs from Canada, but we also want to do B2Bs with these investors, with Canadian VCs, equity funds and angel investors, because they're interested in investing in Canadian venture capital or investment funds. I think that will also help to get more opportunities for Canadian women entrepreneurs.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on to Ms. Fortier for six minutes, please.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to both of you for being here today.

I'm glad to see that we have Sonya Shorey here from Invest Ottawa, someone I've worked with in the past and still collaborate with as the member of Parliament for Ottawa—Vanier. The work that Invest Ottawa is doing, I think, is a game-changer for our community.

I also want to thank Christine Nakamura for being here today. I'm glad to meet you, and I'm sure you're a leader, also, in what you do.

In 2018, the Government of Canada established the women entrepreneurship fund and allocated \$20 million in the federal budget to finance more than 200 projects, and then an additional \$10 million, including \$2.5 million for indigenous women entrepreneurs, to help fund approximately 100 projects.

It has been a fund that gave the opportunity for women entrepreneurs and their businesses to receive a value of approximately \$7 billion.

I want to talk about the women entrepreneurship strategy. First of all, are you aware of it? Second, what is working and what is not working? How can the government look at keeping what's working and maybe look at what needs to be done? This is where I'm hoping you can share with us how this women entrepreneurship fund is supporting women in business.

I'll start with Sonya, and then Christine.

• (1655)

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Excellent. I'm certainly very aware of the women entrepreneurship strategy and have collaborated with many organizations on several shared goals, several projects.

I think one of the most important things in Canada is the power of critical mass collaboration—individuals, individual communities or organizations, for all of their best efforts and the difference that certainly every individual and every step makes; the harnessing of all of our collaboration together; and all of the resources, the learnings, the opportunities. It's not just one project that will help to drive this kind of dial with 131 years to parity. It's the consistent collaboration, sharing of lessons learned, harnessing the power of the Canadian and the global network so that it's not limited to a single point of contact, a single project, but is something that we invest in continuously, creating new avenues, new opportunities, together.

When I look at some of the women I identified in the opening of my speech, they have benefited from the women entrepreneurship strategy, from organizations like Futurpreneur, Invest Ottawa, the Capital Angel Network, and so many others, and likely including the one that Christine represents.

Depending upon the target markets that you're looking at and the specific sectors, the challenges can be very different. When we look at the period that you described, MP Fortier, we think about the pandemic and the disproportionate impact that had on women. It was devastating to many businesses. You had many women founders who were managing small children, elder care and health issues in the home while trying to fundraise and get access to these global markets.

Consistent, continuous effort, sharing of lessons learned, powerful sharing of those networks so that we're creating dozens and multiples of opportunities, and not just one.... That's what I would encourage to be built upon from the women entrepreneurship strategy.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you very much.

Madam Nakamura, do you have a response to that question also?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Absolutely. We are a proud recipient of WES funding. I have to thank the Government of Canada for seeing the value in our project. Without that funding we wouldn't have been able to reach out to the many stand-alone organizations throughout Canada that are helping, in their own way, to support women entrepreneurs. Now that, with the funding, we have met these people, we're able to bring them together, and we're working as a team as much as possible.

Some places were very remote and difficult to get to—we never would have made it there. We did a round table specifically for indigenous women entrepreneurs in Yukon, for example, where we brought together 25 indigenous women entrepreneurs. One of them succeeded in competing and getting on to one of our delegations to South Korea and Thailand, and she found partners for her green hydrogen technology in South Korea.

As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, for the amount of money that we received, we already helped women entrepreneurs achieve \$21.5 million in deals, and there are 70 negotiations ongoing right now. We still have stories and outcomes coming out of our 2019 pilot trade mission to Japan, for example. Without the funding from WES we couldn't have done this.

In fact, as I said, we've been able to reach out to so many different minority groups. We've had indigenous women, women of colour, women who identify as women or who are from the LGBTQ+ community. We have very diverse delegations, but they are stellar. Without that funding, we couldn't have made this happen.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you very much.

For the last 30 seconds of my time, I say, simply, that this is a study for which we want to make sure we have recommendations. As you hear the conversation we're having today and the questions we're asking, you might have more ideas afterwards, so you are welcome to submit other recommendations on what we should be working on and, maybe, what we should not be doing—sometimes it's good to have both. I believe that, in this study, we want to make sure we increase the participation of women. We're at 16%, and we want to increase that to much more. I think you understand exactly where we're going, so please don't hesitate to submit more recommendations to the committee.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Madame Fortier—

The Chair: Not at this moment.... Ms. Fortier took the 30 seconds she had left and opened the door for another whole session.

Voices: Oh, oh!

We move to Monsieur Savard-Tremblay for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank both witnesses.

During the October 7 meeting, witnesses proposed the introduction of a tax incentive that would encourage larger companies to

buy from women-managed or women-owned businesses. It would work a bit like what is done in the United States, that is, based on certain quotas.

My question to you both is whether you think this is a good way to help women entrepreneurs.

[English]

Ms. Sonya Shorey: We did a lot of work, with respect to our collaborators in Canada, on understanding better the attributes of the SBIR program in the United States. We put forward a series of recommendations that certainly encourage the concept of thresholds, with proper terms and conditions that create new avenues for accessibility and encourage risk-taking within the Government of Canada and other governments...not to simply have the opportunity to demonstrate new technologies or products that are founded by women, but to encourage that pathway to actual procurement.

One of the best ways we see this work is at one of our sites, Area X.O. It's hosted by Invest Ottawa, supported by all three levels of government and five multinationals, and leveraged by dozens of start-ups, scale-ups and SMEs. We actually bring Transport Canada together with small to medium-sized companies, start-ups and scale-ups, including women in tech. We do pilot tests of different technologies that advance their commercialization, getting them closer to market with feedback from our regulator in this country, so that they are not only getting exposure and a first customer but also the opportunity to take in all kinds of insights from those partners and potential customers on that project. It is collaborative in serving a particular challenge or doing a particular task or performance, together with the Government of Canada, that's required for a certain type of implementation—keeping city streets and vulnerable road users safe while things like connected and autonomous vehicles, low-speed automated shuttles, drones and other technologies are implemented in novel ways.

Encouraging that opportunity to create greater pathways as an emergence and an outcome from those projects would be very helpful. Creating thresholds similar to what they have in SBIR in the United States is something we are certainly recommending. We put forth a paper on it and are meeting with ISED on it next week. We would be very delighted to share that with you. It encompasses a carve-out for women and marginalized founders to encourage breaking down barriers and to create more opportunity for those who would not otherwise have that potential.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: What do you think, Ms. Nakamura?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: I apologize.

[English]

The French translation isn't coming into my headphones. I didn't hear the translation.

The Chair: Ms. Nakamura, at the bottom of the screen you can select the language.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Thank you.

I'm so sorry. I missed the question.

The Chair: Go ahead, Monsieur Savard-Tremblay.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I'll ask my question again.

As I mentioned, some witnesses have told us about the idea of introducing a tax incentive that would encourage larger businesses to buy from businesses whose managers or owners are women, as is done in the United States, based on certain quotas.

Do you think that's the right path to follow?

[English]

Ms. Christine Nakamura: To be frank, because we're dealing mainly with start-ups and smaller companies, some of them pre-revenue but a majority of them revenue-making companies, the tax issue has not come into play too much as yet. These are women founders who are raising funds right now up to the series A level. There has not been much chatter or much discussion with our groups on the tax incentives, but I think as the companies scale, there will be much more focus coming forward.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Should Canada in particular be proposing changes in general that would put more focus on women entrepreneurs who export or wish to export? The question is really about exporting.

What suggestions would you make to the representatives who will soon be at the CUSMA negotiating table, for example, in 2025? Should changes be made to encourage women exporters?

My question is for both witnesses.

[English]

Ms. Christine Nakamura: I think that is why our team is focused on increasing the number of women who export. While the businesses may thrive in Canada, our population is very small in comparison with some of the larger populations, even south of the border. Definitely there's a huge market down there, but it's also in other parts of the world. I think companies that want to grow have to think big, which means export.

That is what our team does. We encourage women and talk about the markets. We're focused on Asia, but we talk about the markets and the potential that these markets offer to women who have viable products or services that match and align with the markets we are introducing them to.

Indeed, I think it's very important to get more women interested in exporting if they're at the stage of being internationally market-ready.

Ms. Sonya Shorey: I would certainly build on that and echo that.

We have worked together with the Capital Angels Network at Invest Ottawa to encourage and help equip women founders to be investment-ready through SheBoot. We have seen that \$25 million in follow-on investment include the period during the pandemic. I have to tell you that the number is actually higher; it's just that we're not permitted to share under NDA.

If we can create similar programs that look at export readiness for companies out there at the appropriate stage, where they have scaled—we certainly have those companies in our region being led by women—and we create curated programs with industry experts on international trade exports, including organizations like Christine's, we can create that collaboration and a program that specifically brings that lens, so that all training, education and supports are specifically around that targeted goal of export readiness.

When I think about what we've done in our community with Invest Ottawa, we have overhauled, end to end, in the last six years, every single step in our venture development program. It has led to a significant increase in the number of women founders and diverse women founders. In the SheBoot program, similarly, 50% of the women founders are from diverse backgrounds—self-selected, self-identified and with intention. If you don't bring intention and put the right investment resources and experts surrounding them with that single goal, then it becomes diluted. I believe, with this type of focus, any accelerator, incubator, innovation hub and all of these organizations that bring this expertise, working together, can deliver it. That is exactly how we built SheBoot.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being present with us today in this important study.

I wasn't present at the last two meetings on this topic, so I am pleased to know that Ms. Nakamura mentioned some of the intersectional approaches that are necessary for addressing this work in its full potential.

Black and indigenous women, in particular women of colour, face extraordinary barriers. I welcomed your testimony today, and your opening remarks around some of the work to see those persons included in your work more recently, with your gathering on National Indigenous Peoples Day.

I'm curious to know, of course, how the challenges of women of colour are being met by organizations through this fund. I've actually had an opportunity, when I was given notice about this fund, to canvass some women businesses in Edmonton and Alberta. To be very frank, very few had heard about it. We have a lot of indigenous and Black women-owned businesses who've never heard at all about the women entrepreneurship fund. It seems like—maybe this is a bias coming from Western Canada—this is really focused in many ways in particular urban areas and hasn't really penetrated the areas outside of urban centres, particularly for women businesses that are in the far north or in rural areas.

Ms. Nakamura, I was pleased to hear you make a comment about a representative from the Yukon. I just wanted to offer that up at the very outset of this. I want to speak for the first bit of our discussion today on the women entrepreneurship strategy in its totality.

Some of this was asked by my colleague, Ms. Fortier, but to put it simply, is the program enough to address the gender imbalance in Canadian businesses, in particular as it relates to businesses owned by Black or indigenous people or people of colour?

Ms. Nakamura, please.

• (1710)

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Yes, I wanted to mention that despite the pandemic, since the WES funding was launched, the number of majority women-owned companies has increased to 18.4% from 15.6% in 2017. I think that the WES funding has had some impact, with various groups being funded to do activities that they would normally not have been able to do.

It definitely is making a difference, despite the fact that there were companies that went bankrupt or declined during the COVID period. Of the ones that scaled, I know of many companies that actually took off during the pandemic because of the nature of their business.

In fact, 2.8% doesn't seem like a whole lot, but that's still a significant increase to the number of women pre pandemic.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Just to square the circle on that question, is it enough support, or should there be an allocation of further money?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Absolutely.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Simply put, yes.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: That's why, in my closing statement, as I said, we need to continue with this. This is just a small sampling that I'm providing from our project, but I'd like to hear from all of the others.

The women entrepreneurship knowledge hub, part of the Diversity Institute at TMU, has all the data. They've been collecting data from all the recipients of WES funding. I think it's important to look at those and research those to see what the value add is. If we do stop the funding, all of the work that's been done over the last five years with the WES funding is going to go to by the wayside, so we have to continue with it.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Of course.

I have another question here. I know we're running short on time, Madam Chair, but I think I can squeeze this in.

In recent years, the Canadian trade agreements, including CUSMA, the Canada-Ukraine agreement, the CPTPP and the CETA agreement, have all included gender-related provisions. What sort of impact, if any, have you seen from these provisions? Can they be strengthened?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Sonya, do you want to go first?

Ms. Sonya Shorey: I'm going to invite you to respond, because it is so specific to trade agreements.

I do have a comment on the previous question.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Okay. I just want to say that while the provisions that I believe are in there, including in the CPTPP, are not binding, I think that most economies are starting to embrace the fact that we have to gender mainstream.

As I said, I'm leading a mission to Taiwan and Vietnam in three weeks. Vietnam has really taken off. They're a signatory to the CPTPP, and they are looking at different ways of enhancing women entrepreneurs in their country as well. Taiwan is not a member of the CPTPP, but Taiwan is probably the most inclusive economy in the Indo-Pacific. From the political level to the business level, there are women leaders everywhere. That's the reason I'm leading a trade mission there.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much.

I don't think I have enough time for another question, but perhaps, Ms. Shorey, you could speak to that first question.

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Excellent. I just want to say that continued investment and collaboration are absolutely critical. We have made meaningful progress. It is too slow, and it is not enough, and without sustained effort, collaboration, investment and intention, particularly for women from marginalized communities.... As I shared in my opening remarks, we look at women from all identities and all intersections of identity.

One of the lessons learned from those who have lived experience is to meet women founders from marginalized communities where they are at. That takes funds to get out into the communities, to identify pockets of women founders who have that potential, and to do that in a way that's respectful of their culture and their background and where they feel safe.

That's something that we have taken steps to do. In many cases, the investment does not exist to do that. Everyone is putting all of the resources, passion and heart that we have in this country—those who are invested in this goal—into doing this together, but it takes support to do it systemically, to scale it and to make the kind of impact and difference that we all strive to.

Some of the organizations we've collaborated with include Adaawe Indigenous Business Hub here in the capital, Pow Wow Pitch and Chnge Mker, which serves Black entrepreneurs. There are so many diverse communities where founders feel safe. It's about getting out into those communities, pulling them in and giving them a sense of belonging, and without intention and funds to do that, it's impossible, so thank you for all of the investment.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Shorey.

We're moving on to Mr. Baldinelli for five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for your excellent presentations today.

I'm going to first go to Ms. Nakamura.

Thank you for your presentation and your suggestions and recommendations.

In the first one, I didn't get a chance to get it all written down, but you talked about weaving together a suite of programs to assist women founder businesses. I was wondering if you could expand on that. Is it the initial trade missions, or is there something else, like the follow-up?

That's a fantastic job in doing those trade missions. You talked about \$21 million in deals, but what further can be done? Once those deals have been started, who assists with the regulatory and policy issues that those women founder businesses then, once they're on the ground, have to take on and be challenged with?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: I'm going to start by saying, pre-mission, all of the women have to apply and compete to get on our trade missions, because we cover their expenses to go on the trade mission. It's a Canada-wide competition to apply for. We set up a jury to select the companies that we think will align with the commercial demands of the destination economy.

These women will get together. We select them several months before we leave. We provide them pre-mission training. We created a template, because we heard from those 300 women, during our round tables, about the needs and how to convince them to go abroad and export. We provide pre-mission training, market access training, market intelligence training, and business and cultural protocols. We will do some research and provide their competitors in-market, for example.

All of these things that we do in preparation are partly to get them studying too, because the onus is also on them to better prepare themselves; unless you're market-ready, you're not going to do anything when you get over there.

We bring in the diplomats and the trade commissioner service. We work very closely with the trade commissioner service in Canada, as well as in the missions abroad, to give them briefings on what to expect, and then we hire B2B service providers to interview the women and find out exactly what it is that they want to do in the market. Then they go on and do their Rolodex calls to make sure that the B2Bs are going to amount to something or that they have good potential.

The training is absolutely necessary, and for when they come back, we've set up a Slack network of all these women. They chatter on it and train each other on regulatory problems: "Somebody has faced this," or "Don't get into this trouble, because we ran into this problem." We have a network on Slack, on which all of the women whom we've taken abroad communicate with and train each other, so that camaraderie is also invaluable to what has come out. It's not just the business partners in-market; it's among themselves, because they would never have met each other unless they had gone on the trade mission and spent a week together studying each other and learning about each other's businesses and ways to help each other.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Ms. Shorey, you talked about the difficulties with regard to venture capital for women founder businesses. How can the federal government assist women-led and -owned businesses and entrepreneurs to commercialize their products and gain proper market access?

Ms. Sonya Shorey: I'm very grateful for that question.

At Invest Ottawa, we have worked carefully and closely with a host of different women founders from different walks of life to better understand their needs, the types of technologies and products they are developing, and what type of commercialization requirements they have. In certain cases, there are very unique capabilities, such as those that exist at Area X.O for hardware-based or smart mobility-oriented technologies, for breaking down those barriers, creating access to a host of different types of facilities and experts and access to capital, including programs such as SheBoot that enable the specific training to be investment-ready.

There are so many women founders who have incredible innovations, and they don't know how to scale; they don't know how to commercialize. Here in the capital, we're very proud that we have come together as a community with a host of different organizations, including our post-secondaries and all three levels of government, to tackle this challenge in a very collaborative way. We do a call every year to other communities across Canada, and we look to share our lessons learned to determine how every community can harness specific resources, capabilities and experts with intention in their community. It's a choice.

With the funding that is going into a host of different organizations, creating requirements for a particular percentage and for particular goals and target outcomes to be addressed for women founders and marginalized founders would go a very long way. Again, that takes investment so that you can bring in the right expertise to work with women founders in a way that's conducive to the way they learn, the way they commercialize, the way they export. The access is different.

We talked earlier about tax policy and open banking. The more avenues we have available to support women.... Often they will not even look to go and specifically get the type of investment that would come from a VC, because they're looking to see how much equity they can keep or how they can do it with that bootstrapped capital.

• (1720)

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Shorey. Thank you. We have lots of questions yet.

We have Mr. Arya for five minutes, please.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Thank you, Chair.

Madam Chair, as a former member of Invest Ottawa, it's my pleasure to welcome Sonya Shorey to our committee. I was on the board of this economic development agency until I decided to enter politics.

Since we came to power in 2015 there's been a dramatic increase in the number of women in the top management positions in the Canadian corporate sector. It's not just that we shared the path with a gender-balanced cabinet; we also brought in Bill C-25, which asked the Canadian corporate sector, in their annual statements to stakeholders, to explicitly state their gender diversity policies. That, I think, stimulated the participation of more women in the corporate sector.

For example, today, 27% of the board members of the Canadian corporate sector are women, which is up from 11% in 2014. Today, 89% of the boards have at least one woman, compared to 49% in 2014. We have three or more women on 36% of boards, compared to 8% in 2014. In west Ottawa, I think, the majority—at least 50%—of the board members are women. I think in the number of employees at Invest Ottawa, women are in the majority, which is a good thing.

Ms. Shorey, I'll come back to you. I just have a quick question for Ms. Nakamura.

Ms. Nakamura, you said that women-owned businesses have gone up from 15.6% to 18.4%. Can you tell me what percentage of those are visible minorities or women from indigenous communities?

Ms. Christine Nakamura: I'm sorry. I don't have that data, but I wanted to answer back on the question of the visible minorities that participated in our trade missions—41% are women of colour on our trade missions.

Mr. Chandra Arya: That's okay.

Listen, I remember a study back in 2014, when only 36% of the top management positions within the corporate sector were women, which was growing. Ideally, we are looking forward to growing to about 50%. Out of that 36%, though, only 1% of them were women from visible minorities.

Ms. Shorey, it's the same question. You deal with lots of women entrepreneurs, etc., and also women in board positions among the founders, among the senior executives. In your guesstimate, what percentage of them are women belonging to visible minorities or indigenous communities?

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Certainly I can speak to SheBoot, because every single founder completes a self-identification.

Mr. Chandra Arya: SheBoot is a very specific program. I'm talking about the overall Ottawa picture of the sectors that Invest Ottawa deals in.

Ms. Sonya Shorey: For the overall Ottawa picture, it would be impossible for me to credibly give you a particular percentage. I can say to you that 50% of the founders we serve through our small business enterprise centre hail—in particular during the pandemic period—from backgrounds that they self-identified and from equity-seeking groups.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Thank you.

Ms. Sonya Shorey: On the technology side, it ranges anywhere from 15% to 30% or 35%. In technology, we do not see as much diversity. We also have a slower step forward in terms of the number of technology women founders [*Inaudible—Editor*]

• (1725)

Mr. Chandra Arya: Thank you. I have another question, and I have limited time.

Programs like the women entrepreneurship fund are good; I fully support it, and it has been quite effective.

The federal government gives lots of subsidies and grants to various programs. For example, to support innovation and research and development, we have programs like SR and ED, and IRAP.

If we were to carve out a portion of the amount already given, instead of introducing new money, and use the existing money that is going to the corporate sector as grants and subsidies and increase the percentage to incentivize women entrepreneurs or the businesses where women play a key role, do you think that would be effective?

The Chair: Can I have a very short answer? Mr. Arya is out of time.

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Incentives play a critical role as part of larger suite of policy levers to drive forward on that goal—one of many.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're on to Mr. Savard-Tremblay for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Most women-owned businesses that export tend to be smaller than comparable male-owned businesses. In addition, they are concentrated in the service sector, particularly in professional and technical services, as well as in retail trade.

How do you explain that?

My question is for anyone who wishes to answer.

[English]

Ms. Sonya Shorey: Within Invest Ottawa and within our technology-based venture development programming, as I noted earlier, we serve scale-up companies that generate anywhere from \$500,000 to \$2 million in revenue, and 77% of those companies have at least one woman co-founder and/or senior executive at the C-suite level.

When you work as a community to equip and empower and inspire more women to get into tech, we need to build that STEM pipeline. Today, only 29% of STEM jobs are held by women, and less than 18% are in senior management. If we start at younger ages, in the K to 12 school-age period, and inspire more women to pursue tech and entrepreneurship with the right programming support, expertise and investment opportunities, we absolutely see a difference and are driving that pipeline here in Ottawa for Canada. I'd love to share the data with you.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: I'd like to add to that, if I may, Monsieur Savard-Tremblay. That's why our project focused on tech women. Right from the outset, we sought out women with STEM backgrounds who had technologies to share.

I believe one of the reasons women tend to be more in the services, from what I heard throughout all the discussions we had in the round tables, is that a lot of their innovative services have been born out of a personal need, whether it's for child care, educating children or elder care. The first trade mission, as I mentioned, was on elder care. A lot of women who are burdened with the responsibility of looking after aging parents as well as child care come up with these innovations to help themselves, which translates into the needs of societies like Japan, for example, and the elder care technologies.

I think there are a lot of women in services there, truly, but the technology, too, is to develop something they are passionate about, something they came into and faced up to that they needed to find a solution for. Whether it's clean technology or health care technologies, that's where it almost always starts: at the root bottom.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have two and a half minutes, please, and that will be the end of this round.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Nakamura, I'll give you a bit more time to finish the statement you were making about some of the challenges to the last question.

Ms. Christine Nakamura: Indeed.

I looked after elderly parents. They lived with me, so I know a lot of the problems of women who have those home responsibilities. I raised two children as a single mother and had two aging parents, into their mid-nineties, whom I had to look after.

When I hear of these technologies coming out, I hear this type of story over and over again from women in technology, women with STEM backgrounds. I can tell you that some of the entrepreneurs we've looked after have scaled.... They have won awards around the world with Ph.D.s, master's degrees, scientists. They're incred-

ble women. I'm so proud to take them abroad to Asia to show them off.

I can tell you, as I said to you earlier, that 41% of our women are women from minority groups—visible minorities. The reason we're going to Asia is that a lot of the diaspora who were born over here of immigrant parents started businesses and know what the markets need. They've come up with good businesses that align with the market needs, and 41% is a pretty good stat, I think.

• (1730)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I would agree. That's a testament to your organization and many of the organizations across our country that are doing this work of supporting women entrepreneurs. I know projects that have made significant contributions to our economy, including the women-made and indigenous-made Jolly Jumper, something that I think Canadians right across the country, particularly women, find great pride in.

I think it's important to mention a really interesting fact that I think you mentioned several times now, which is that much of this incentive is borne out of need. I think we have to find ways to better support women, so that it's not a reaction to only economic or poverty circumstances for which they're accessing market solutions, but finding ways to support them before that point. That's for young women in particular, while they're in their places of education, school, post-secondary. We need to get access to those groups earlier, before it's too late.

Does either of you want to spend time on how we support young women before it becomes a situation of need, to give them the access, encouraging confidence before it becomes a dire situation?

Ms. Sonya Shorey: I love this topic. Inspiration in the schools. Role models. If you see her, you—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: How do we get you in the schools?

The Chair: Thank you very much. I think this could go on for much longer, but we have other witnesses.

I have to suspend for a few minutes while we do a sound check on our witnesses, so I will suspend.

Thank you very much for that valuable information. Maybe we'll have to have you back. We'll have to see.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1730)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We have with us now, from the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce, Nancy Wilson, chief executive officer.

From the Fédération des agricultrices du Québec, Valérie Fortier, president, by video conference.

From the Organization of Women in International Trade, we have Nathalie Bradbury, president, OWIT Ottawa.

Welcome to you all. We will start with opening remarks of up to five minutes.

Ms. Wilson, you have the floor, please, for up to five minutes.

• (1735)

Ms. Nancy Wilson (Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Nancy Wilson. I'm the founder and CEO of the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce, or CanWCC. CanWCC is the only chamber of commerce in Canada that specifically represents and advocates for the 1.2 million women and non-binary business owners across the country. We have over 1,000 members across all provinces and territories. We also have an extensive partner network of entrepreneur support organizations and corporations that sell products and services that business owners need. We provide connection, community and a national conversation to advance change.

The women's entrepreneurship strategy, or WES, while not without limitations, has provided essential support and visibility to organizations like CanWCC. To drive genuinely inclusive economic growth, I believe the government must commit to long-term, sustainable WES funding. Economic equity requires consistent and cumulative investment. Organizations like the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce deserve the same government backing as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, especially when you consider that over the past decade, fewer than 5% of policies endorsed by the Canadian Chamber have even mentioned the words "women" or "female".

Approximately 18% of SMEs in Canada are majority-owned by women, but, of course, only 11% of those businesses export. Women entrepreneurs often face limited access to capital, which hinders their ability to expand internationally. In addition to transportation, logistics and customs fees, there are foreign exchange gains, losses and expenses to navigate. While large corporations may mitigate currency risks through hedging, small and micro-businesses typically lack these resources and can suffer significant losses. Small businesses are more likely to pay higher fees when they exchange smaller amounts of currency more often. They are also exposed to unfavourable exchange rates and other fees when they pay U.S. dollar and other currency bills with credit cards.

Government policies, or perhaps a lack thereof, around procurement further signal a lack of commitment supporting women entrepreneurs. While the federal government set a 5% procurement target for indigenous suppliers starting in 2022, there is still no equivalent commitment for women-owned businesses, despite the women's entrepreneurship strategy being introduced in budget 2018.

My final comment relates to support for the self-employed: 80% of women entrepreneurs, 50% of Black entrepreneurs and 68% of indigenous entrepreneurs are self-employed. Many of these individuals will become the SMEs of the future. If we want them to be

successful exporters, we need to support them in developing the skills and strategies that enable them to do so from day one.

CanWCC's advocacy is based on advancing economic equity for all Canadians. Our economy thrives when diverse perspectives are represented, valued and integrated. Long-term funding, meaningful procurement targets and accessible resources for self-employed and women-owned businesses are essential to building a fairer, more inclusive marketplace. We stand ready to work hand in hand with government, industry and community partners to break down barriers and to champion lasting, meaningful change.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have Ms. Fortier, please, for up to five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Valérie Fortier (President, Fédération des agricultrices du Québec): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Valérie Fortier, and I'm a farmer and president of the Fédération des agricultrices du Québec. I am co-owner of a dairy farm in Saint-Valère, Quebec. I own 71% of the business, and my father owns 29%.

The Fédération des agricultrices du Québec is the only farm organization in Quebec dedicated exclusively to women in the sector, and the only women's farm organization in Canada that is so structured. It is made up of 10 regional farm women's unions that take part in decisions affecting the agricultural sector and the status of women. The federation is also a specialized group in the Union des producteurs agricoles, or UPA.

Thanks to an initial grant from Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions between 2019 and 2023, we developed a women's agricultural entrepreneurship program called Dimension E. The program provides tailored services to women entrepreneurs in agriculture and forestry. It strengthens the potential of all women farmers by giving them tools and support for their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Through this program, women have access to a multitude of services, such as training, free consultation hours with experts, entrepreneurial mentoring and access to a support network for women entrepreneurs.

In 2023, we received a second grant, this time from Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, specifically from the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy Ecosystem Fund, which enabled us to roll out our program across Canada. Since the program launch, we've supported more than 700 Canadian women farmers in their entrepreneurial journey.

Canada has more than 75,000 women farm operators, who make up 28.7% of all farm operators. We also note that women get into agriculture in less traditional ways than men. Farm transfers between family members or others are the main entry point into agriculture. However, 44% of women start their own farms rather than receiving them through transfers, compared with 32% of men.

I'd like to make a recommendation to increase the number of women owners or co-owners of farm businesses. Our Dimension E program can equip women with leadership and management skills, but one major hurdle that women entrepreneurs encounter is access to financing. Research shows that, no matter what the field, women are less likely to apply for financing. When they do, they're judged by different criteria than men and are often subject to stricter standards. A December 2023 study by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business showed that 22% of women's applications are turned down, whereas the average is 15% for businesses as a whole. What's more, women generally receive less financing than men.

Women agricultural entrepreneurs face an additional financing hurdle, which is access to financing after age 40. Most current programs are designed to support the next generation of women entrepreneurs, but studies show that women farmers tend to start a business after the age of 40; that is, after having raised their family and worked for many years in the family business, generally for free. Adapting these programs or creating others to promote financing for women over 40 would increase the number of women farm owners and ensure their autonomy.

I'd like to make a second recommendation. We're very grateful for the funding we received from the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy Ecosystem Fund. Without this major assistance, we would not have been able to set up such a program and support so many women entrepreneurs. My recommendation would be that the government continue to fund women's agricultural projects. Given that, in 2024, women made up more than 50% of agricultural school students, supporting women agricultural entrepreneurs means supporting thriving, fair and sustainable agriculture. It means investing in Canadians' pantry, but also investing in the world's pantry, since Canada ranks eighth among the largest exporting countries of agricultural products worldwide.

• (1740)

Thank you for inviting me to testify.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Bradbury, you have up to five minutes, please.

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury (President, OWIT Ottawa, Organization of Women in International Trade): Thank you.

[Translation]

Madam Chair, members of the committee and distinguished guests, good afternoon.

I will give my remarks in English, but I invite you to speak to me in the official language of your choice.

[English]

I am speaking to you today from the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, who have been here for millennia. Their culture and presence continue to nurture this land that we all benefit from and enjoy.

I am Nathalie Bradbury, president of the Organization of Women in International Trade, Ottawa chapter. OWIT Ottawa is a Canadian independent, non-profit corporation established in 2010 and run by volunteers. OWIT Toronto was established in 1999.

We are part of a growing international association of about 30 chapters worldwide and expanding steadily, with another dozen in the works around the world, thus demonstrating the continually growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in trade globally.

OWIT Ottawa members are trade professionals. They work in corporate finance, trade law, cross-border tax, defence procurement, freight forwarding, the foreign service and other areas. OWIT supports women entrepreneurs by facilitating trade through skills development and working with our partner organizations, such as the Forum for International Trade Training, an ISO-certified Canadian organization that provides professional trade certification worldwide.

OWIT also aims to contribute to trade policy development by conveying the concerns of women entrepreneurs to all levels of government, and also to the World Trade Organization, UNCTAD, the International Trade Centre and others.

OWIT Toronto also works with the Trade Facilitation Office of Canada, which helps SMEs from developing countries export to Canada. FITT and TFOC also partner with OWIT at the international level and provide services throughout their OWIT chapters overseas. We collaborate with local businesses, through Invest Ottawa and SheBoot, providing their members with insights, knowledge and guidance on international trade. We act as a bit of an international division or international conduit, to help them understand the difficulties of international trade.

We are grateful to be making our third appearance before this committee, and I want to take the opportunity to talk to you about what our members are saying about the important issue of trade and gender. The first time we spoke to your committee was in 2017, I believe, with the renewal of NAFTA.

I want to begin by recognizing and thanking the government for the WES and the groundbreaking policies, programs and funding it has provided. Annual share from the WEKH, the World Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, has already been mentioned, so I won't go into that. EDC also notes that women-owned businesses contribute more than \$117 billion to Canada's economy. These are great indicators of progress.

We look forward to seeing the evaluation of the WES, so that direct results can be identified and next steps recommended. We also recognize that Canada has been a world leader in advancing women's interests through trade agreements, and we hope this will continue.

Since 2017, Canada has been advancing trade and gender chapters and bringing inclusivity more broadly throughout the trade agreements. Progress at the bilateral level, such as the Canada-Chile FTA and CETA with the EU, can often go further than at the WTO, but both tracks are needed to build awareness and to make progress internationally.

OWIT also acknowledges that the trade advisory services, the CanExport program and trade missions organized by the TCS, and the financial services offered by EDC have had positive outcomes for women exporters.

The whole-of-government approach to enabling women to become full participants in the economy of trade has been truly foundational. Several witnesses have already touched upon important domestic issues, so I will be focusing more specifically on trade issues.

The first important point I would like to make is that trade is complicated, and it's difficult. Professionals spend their whole careers working in trade fields such as those I mentioned earlier. Plus, there's a whole army of specialists working strictly on the chapters and non-conforming measures. We're talking about tariff lines, HS codes, TRQs, rules of origin, trade and services, SPS, TBT—the list goes on and on. It is no wonder business people are surprised when they look to trade internationally.

We recommend that new exporters look first to building connections with trade experts, such as with OWIT in Canada and our chapters overseas—some of our colleagues in the organizations that have presented have some knowledge—but also that they reach out to the government services that are there to help them on their journey.

• (1745)

I would like to highlight a few successful women exporters.

The Chair: Ms. Bradbury, I'm sorry to interrupt. Your five minutes are up, and the committee members have lots of questions. If you could save your closing remarks and possibly be able to answer some questions, it would be appreciated. Thank you very much.

Mr. Martel, you have six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I don't know who will be able to answer my first question, but it is for all of you, ladies.

We have to take into account the economic challenges that many Canadian women face and that make it difficult for them to save up to start a business.

What could we learn from the Swedish model, for example, where women rely more on their personal networks and savings rather than government funding, and where the percentage of women entrepreneurs is nonetheless 30%, whereas it's 19% in Canada?

• (1750)

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury: I'll begin by saying that all the studies show that women rely heavily on family support or other means to start their businesses. They like to borrow much less than men and rely more on their own financial means and on those close to them. That's what we're seeing in Canada as well.

The African chapters of our organization tell us that, too often, women are in the informal sector, and we can say that the same holds somewhat true in Canada. Many women are sole proprietors and are not considered businesses. They don't like to incorporate. In Canada, as in Africa, we're therefore trying to encourage them to become more involved in the formal sector, so that banks and other institutions will agree to lend them money, for example.

It's good to do business with your family's help and in a slightly more personal way, but it's also good to have a bigger presence in the more formalized system, to be able to take advantage of everything it offers.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

Does anyone else wish to add something?

[English]

Ms. Nancy Wilson: Actually, over 80% of women start their businesses using personal credit. That's actually identified as a problem, because they incur all this personal debt. It tends to hurt their credit score, when they should be building their business credit score.

Then, when they build up their business a bit, they go to approach a bank for a business loan. They may have some good revenue coming in and some good cash flow. However, because their businesses tend to be in sectors where they don't have a lot of actual physical collateral to provide, the bank will often ask them for a personal guarantee. They check their credit score, and their personal credit score is not so good, because they have all this personal debt sitting on them.

There's always the question of whether you can self-finance your business. It's the ideal. If you have this nest egg, that's a great thing; however, it's a double-edged sword, I would say.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

Ms. Fortier, my next question is for you, but I invite you to take your turn answering this question first, if you like.

Ms. Valérie Fortier: I would like to add something.

Most of the time, farm women will start businesses much later in their lives. They often raise their children first or work to build a business with their spouse. So they do invisible work, as there is no salary attached. When they want to go and borrow, they don't have a credit record, because they've always done invisible work and haven't really had a salary. You can't use that as an argument to go seek financing to launch a business.

That explains to some extent why it is more difficult to start a business in the agricultural sector when you are over 40. All funding programs are designed for the next generation. The maximum age of eligibility is 40 years and 364 days or, in some cases, 39 years and 364 days. So women over 40 have a great deal of difficulty starting a business.

In the dairy sector, for example, women are giving up their business shares to the next generation and would like to start other businesses, whether in horticulture or berry production. But the main farm can't finance their project, because of farm debt. Then, when these women go to financial institutions, they're told that they have more years of work behind them than ahead of them. However, it must be understood that these newly created businesses will also eventually be transferred to the next generation.

• (1755)

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

I have another question for you.

[English]

The Chair: You have 26 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: From what you've seen, what impact do high taxes have on farmers and small business owners in the agricultural sector?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: Of course, the new realities of climate change, bringing heavy rains and temperature variations, are having an impact on sales. We're seeing more and more cases of agricultural businesses with less income. What's more, high taxes and interest rates are jeopardizing the future viability of these businesses. The situation is challenging, especially for small businesses, but also for large ones, which have to make major investments. For example, for a company located in a remote area, there are significant transportation costs. This just adds to the burden on companies, at a time when we're trying to make them more efficient. At some point, it becomes—

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Fortier, I'm so sorry to interrupt. There was an extra minute there. Thank you so much.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

[English]

The Chair: We have Ms. Fortier for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: This time, the chair is addressing me, the other Ms. Fortier. Ms. Fortier, you and I have the same last name. It is a pleasure to meet you. Maybe we are related.

I sincerely thank all the witnesses for being here today. This committee study is really important. It's about looking at what the federal government is doing right and what it could be doing more of. The experience and expertise of witnesses like the ones we're hearing from today will enable the federal government to focus on what it can do to foster greater participation and equality for women.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bradbury. I am pleased to see you here today.

Earlier, you gave some examples of women. My question will perhaps allow you to expand on that. Let's delve into the potential participation of women in entrepreneurship. The committee is studying this matter and I wonder if we can exceed the 16% threshold for women-owned businesses.

Is there potential there? And if so, how do we unlock it?

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury: Absolutely, there is potential, and it's just the beginning. A lot has been done so far, especially under the women entrepreneurship strategy, through funding and programs, for example. That's the whole-of-government approach. All of that helps. Even though the movement started before these measures were introduced, things are really taking off now. That will definitely continue.

I also see what immigrant women bring to the table. I am a first-generation immigrant. At OWIT-Ottawa, three out of ten women are first-generation immigrants. We also have three women who are Black, indigenous or people of colour. That gives us a variety of perspectives. We're a very open organization, with highly educated people. When people are educated, they do things a little differently from immigrants in the past, for example, who would buy a franchise and then work to build that business.

There are some great examples of women doing very exciting things.

[English]

I will just mention Nita Tandon, a health scientist. She is one of our members, and she wanted to create safe, plastic-free containers for her daughters' lunches and snacks after BPA was considered a health hazard. Not finding them, she created her own stainless steel containers, which are now sold in Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand. This is retail.

[Translation]

I mention this for the benefit of Mr. Savard-Tremblay, who was interested in this matter earlier. Even though it's retail, it's also state-of-the-art technology that is very good—

• (1800)

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm sorry to interrupt. Unfortunately, I don't have enough time.

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury: I understand. I'm sorry.

Hon. Mona Fortier: That's great. If there are any other examples of women entrepreneurs you would like to share with us, we would certainly be happy to hear them.

Now I'd like to turn to you, Ms. Wilson. You will probably also be able to answer my question on the potential participation of women in entrepreneurship, given that your organization is well represented across the country.

[English]

Ms. Nancy Wilson: Yes, absolutely. From my perspective, I have great optimism that those numbers can go up. I think there are a couple of different things that we need to do.

I have a lot of answers to this question. I'll focus on one.

I think we need to look beyond gender. We need to realize that when we look at equity, equality and advancing those topics, we can't look at one silo or one issue in a vacuum. We have the women entrepreneurship strategy. We have the Black entrepreneurship program and the 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurship program. We really need to start looking at underserved and equity-deserving groups and developing programs and sustainable long-term funding for advancing equity and equality en masse for all of those groups.

I started CanWCC in 2018. Two years later, we were hit by COVID. It felt so false to me to continue to be talking about gender equity and equality when it wasn't just women. Oh, women were certainly pounded pretty hard during COVID, but so many equity-seeking groups were suffering.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm going to have to cut you off, because, unfortunately, my time is running out.

I just want to inform members that I'm submitting a motion to the clerk so that we can study it at a later time, because we currently have guests. I just want to give a motion to extend the study, and you will receive this motion.

Ms. Nancy Wilson: Thank you.

The Chair: Let's continue on here for the moment, if we can.

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, you have six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

My first question is for Valérie Fortier.

I am very glad that you are here, because you are very familiar with the very specific reality of women farmers. I represent the riding of Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, which is home to a very large number of women farmers. I really wanted you to be here today, and I'm eager to hear what you have to say.

On October 8, your organization published the results of a Leger survey it had commissioned. According to the results of this survey, 90% of women farmers report living with a high or very high mental load. One of the factors identified was multi-tasking. Respondents reported that they performed an average of 5.1 different jobs within their farm business.

To your knowledge, is the situation different among male farmers? If so, what explains that difference?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: Yes, there is a difference. When it comes to manual, farm-related tasks, it's similar. Conversely, women have more additional tasks. They handle more household chores, more subsidy applications, more accounting, more of their children's appointments and even their spouses' appointments.

In addition, the study shows that the weather has a major impact on women's work. They are often the ones who have to schedule work performed by custom operators such as seeding or harvesting, and that work has to be scheduled based on weather forecasts. That is an extra burden for women.

In addition, women deal more with the labourers on the farm. Men deal less with employees.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Now, the big question is this: What can we do to help women farmers manage their multiple responsibilities?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: That is precisely one of the requests that have been made to the Union des producteurs agricoles in the past. We pushed the government to bring in foreign workers to help women on their farms. Let's not forget that 27% of farm owners or co-owners are women. In some cases, the men work outside and the women have to take care of the children, make dinner and clean the house. We tried to see whether it was possible to hire foreign workers to do housework or watch the children. As we know, day care centres are not set up for farming communities. We need day cares with non-standard schedules. We're trying to set up that kind of thing, but it's hard to do it without funding. We're trying to start a pilot project in the Lower St. Lawrence, but it's not easy.

In short, we would like to be able to hire foreign workers to do more work related to home and family.

• (1805)

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: To what extent does this mental load affect women farmers' desire to run a business or their state of mind?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: The heavier the mental load, the more isolated women will be within their business. The suicide rate in the agricultural sector is increasing. The greater the mental load, the more isolated women become. When they have fewer social connections and are alone, things come to a head at some point.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Do I have a little time left, Madam Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You have two minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: The results of the survey you published include other interesting figures on the youngest women farmers, those aged 18 to 34. According to 94% of respondents in this age group, the main challenge is finding a balance between domestic and professional duties. The work-life balance is also a significant challenge, according to 92% of them. Those are the biggest challenges for them.

The percentages are high for every age group, but they're a little higher for younger people. How do you explain that?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: There is more of an onus on women to prove that they are able to take over the business, whether it's family owned or owned by non-relatives. This is not the case for men. The figure is much lower for them because they don't have as much need to prove that they are ready to take over or that they are entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs, however, have to do a lot more to prove that they are able to run the business and that they have the physical capacity to do the manual tasks.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: You say that women have to prove themselves more. Is that simply due to a prevailing bias within the farming community, or is it more deep-seated than that?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: I would say that upbringing plays a big part in it.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Desjarlais for six minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Bradbury, I understand that you haven't been able to complete your opening remarks. I yield my time to you, should you wish to use that time to complete your important testimony.

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury: Thank you so much.

I guess I should first start by talking about challenges along the way. There are some really excellent stories of successful women exporters, but first I'll talk about the challenges.

One challenge is knowledge about exporting. As I mentioned above, exporting and importing is a complicated business. Many of our members and partners have mentioned that businesswomen are not aware of the government programs available to them. We would recommend more efforts at coordination with trade associations, including OWIT. That would help to reach more companies about the opportunities and benefits of working with the TCS, about benefiting from CanExport, about promoting trade missions, and about the EDC, etc. We stand ready to be a partner with the government in promoting these opportunities.

Also, there are misconceptions and bias, and there are systemic barriers. One of our businesswomen told us a great analogy. Men's football has protective equipment to protect the players: helmets, shoulder pads, etc. To open up football to women, using men's safety equipment with no modifications and receiving the same level of safety is short-sighted. Women need systems that fit their needs in order to reach their desired outcomes. A lot of the programs and services—whether those are in banking or high tech, when you think of AI as the current problem, and when you're looking at government programs—prevent women from fully participating in international trade. If women want to go on trade missions but in sectors that are underserved by women, you're going to have fewer women going on these trade missions. Those are some examples.

For small businesses and ventures in the early stages of export, CanExport was mentioned as being helpful. However, this year it's so far behind in its processing that it's hard to plan marketing campaigns. It's still processing applications submitted until May 3. If you can backdate expenses, that's great, but are you going to take on the expenses when you don't even know whether you're going to be approved? It should hasten the approvals process—that would be a recommendation—by issuing denials earlier or creating mini rounds of approvals, for example. Do them month by month, tranche by tranche.

Another thing is better networking. Many businesswomen have told us that they need better networking. In other words, it needs to be more specialized by market or by industry sector. This networking also needs to include trade professionals. OWIT-Ottawa and OWIT-Toronto are ready to assist with more networking.

We've also brought up big business; somebody mentioned that. The trade team Canada approach with other countries.... It's actually—I think it's Germany and France—the business associations, like the French business association in Hong Kong when I was living there. It was they that organized the business delegations; it wasn't the federal government. This could be an innovative approach that could form part of their responsible business conduct strategy. We need to be shifting from a competition mindset to a collaboration and partnership mindset. Just as in the U.S., we all have to be in it together. It really has to be a collaboration. Should this become standard practice, this would help up-and-coming Canadian businesses—such as women-owned businesses and those of underserved groups—to succeed on their growth journeys and also to benefit from the experience and knowledge of larger, successful Canadian businesses.

If I have time, I'd like to mention one interesting example. A friend of ours was a manager for the Asia-Pacific at a former Ottawa company called Newbridge, and one of his clients in Indonesia was having problems. He said, "Look, I have my best Canadian engineer. I'm going to bring my best Canadian engineer to solve this problem." He brought along a woman engineer. He said, "Look, this person can solve this problem quickly." He understood that by bringing the right person, a woman but an engineer, she would solve the problem for them. There is another example in Ecuador that I could give about another company, but I'll leave it at that.

Thank you.

• (1810)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much. I think that speaks to the immense skill and ability. What struck me in your testimony were a couple of things, and I think I'd like to reiterate them to you so that I can practice my active listening and hopefully the active listening of our committee to what are really important recommendations that you've made.

One is relating to the fact that women's systems are needed. Many of the systems.... You used a very good example. I was on the veterans affairs committee before, and women veterans came forward and said, "Why is it that we are wearing men's military equipment when it's about our safety?" This was a serious issue that really struck me. You're saying the same thing when it comes to

equipping women for business, making sure that they're equipped with the tools that they need, not just inheriting the tools that have been largely developed by men through systems that are largely and predominantly developed and still occupied by men.

You spoke about speed as a process that's important to ensuring the success of women entrepreneurs. For women who are participating in these systems, there could be less...the same regulations but quicker systems. I can hear that.

There's the networking piece. Women are often disenfranchised from being able to access vast professional networks that often exist and are probably multinational as well. You, yourself, are quite an exception. I read your biography. You're a good example and role model for many women across our country in terms of your immense contribution to the international space.

The other one was co-operation over competition. I think this strikes a deep chord with many groups that are marginalized in the economy. We can, in fact, do better work when we work together. That work can be multiplied, and that investment can also be multiplied, but even better, the return to Canadians can be multiplied.

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desjarlais.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much for your testimony today.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Gray for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for Nancy Wilson. I was listening intently to your opening statement and the challenges that your women entrepreneur members are facing. You went into describing higher fees, unfavourable exchange rates and higher credit card fees. All of these really add to the expenses of small businesses.

Even for myself, when I had a business, we didn't use a customs broker, because we weren't big enough to do that, so the courier companies were the broker. We would put things on our credit card, so you get hit on that side. On the other side, I remember being very shocked looking at the credit card processing fees that we also had because we were a small business.

We know that the Liberal Party of Canada's economic adviser to the Prime Minister, Mark Carney, sits on the board of Stripe. Stripe have said they will not be honouring the credit card fee reduction that will be happening here in Canada.

You represent businesswomen, many of whom are running small businesses. Do you believe that all payment processors should be passing on the savings to businesses?

Ms. Nancy Wilson: I hadn't heard that, and I certainly do. I won't speak about Stripe in particular, but I think that doing business by credit card is ubiquitous nowadays. Any kind of e-commerce almost has to be done by credit card. The fees for small businesses absolutely have to be minimized, because they're essentially a tax on small business and an entry fee. They're certainly a barrier.

I'm an accountant, so I know a lot about foreign exchange fees and all of those other credit card fees. When we talk about lowering barriers to international trade, lowering barriers to entry, all these fees add up. It's death by a million cuts.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you so much for that. I wanted to move on to something else. We've heard a fair amount of testimony at a variety of committees with respect to the capital gains tax. I wanted to ask you, with the capital gains tax increase by the Liberal government, will this make it easier or more difficult for women entrepreneurs to access capital?

Ms. Nancy Wilson: I'm not sure if it will have a significant impact. In terms of accessing capital, in terms of, let's say, venture capital, women are struggling to get more than 4%—let's say 5% in a good year. The idea that new legislation is going to make it more difficult.... There are so many other systemic barriers that need to be overcome before we take into account capital gains tax as a significant factor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

Ms. Nancy Wilson: So many of my members are self-employed that it's just not a huge factor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

I want to move on to Valérie Fortier, please.

I have a similar question for you. I'm interested in the impact of the government's capital gains tax on family farms. We know that the president of the Wheat Growers Association told the finance committee that the Liberals' capital gains tax hike “inadvertently targets farmers who produce food to meet domestic and global demand” as “small businesses that are family run”.

Would you agree with these comments?

The Chair: Please be brief.

[Translation]

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: Yes, given the increase in taxes from year to year, it is obvious that the tax burden on municipalities is increasingly switching over to producers. The revenues we make from the crops we grow on our land are not going up, but they always want more from us. Taxes are being increased in relation to our revenues, but we can't increase the price of our products, such as milk, vegetables or grains. Grain prices have been dropping for a number of years. In terms of milk prices, we've lost market share as a result of trade agreements. It's similar for pork. Incomes are getting lower and lower—

• (1820)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Fortier. I apologize for cutting you off. It seems like there's a lot of interest and a lot of questions and not enough time.

Mr. Sidhu, please go ahead.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being with us here today for this very important study.

As we know, small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and our government wants to make sure we continue to stand with small businesses. That's why we lowered the small business tax rate from 11% to 9%.

Just a few weeks ago, since we're talking about credit card fees, we signed a deal with Visa and Mastercard to lower those by 27% to help small businesses with their operating expenses. We want to ensure that we continue standing with small businesses.

To the witnesses here, first I want to turn to Ms. Wilson.

Have you been part of the government's women entrepreneurship strategy, and can you tell me how this strategy has supported your members?

Ms. Nancy Wilson: Yes, we have been part of the strategy. We've been involved in the women entrepreneurship knowledge hub. We've worked with them over the years. They've been hugely influential.

We also received an ecosystem fund grant. We developed a program that's currently going on right now, in pilot phase, whereby we use AI-enabled simulation software to enable women who are looking for venture capital financing for their business to practise their pitch and the question and answer period following a pitch to really hone their skills.

The WES has been hugely influential in helping us to help our members. We're very hopeful that we can continue to access funding to build those programs, as well as to hopefully access funding to directly support our members as entrepreneurs.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

I'll turn now to Ms. Bradbury.

In terms of some of the challenges you're seeing with women-owned businesses or women-led businesses, if there were three things you could do in terms of funding to support programs, would they be on the trade side? Would they be on the operating expense side? What would you suggest to members here, based on your experience, that we need to focus on and prioritize?

Ms. Nathalie Bradbury: The first thing I would do in terms of funding would be to create a network opportunity to do far more events connecting women in Canada by sector and by market to our chapters abroad and elsewhere. Also, I would learn from the Canadian women business owners more, so that when we submitted to the WTO and elsewhere, we could bring their experiences to other countries so that the women, both in the chapters in Canada and in the chapters overseas, could learn from each other when they sell to each other.

We also participate in the Global Summit of Women every year. It was in Spain this year, and it's in Berlin next year. We bring women along. We'd love to create a big delegation of Canadian women to go to the Global Summit of Women in Berlin in 2025.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

I know that, through the Indo-Pacific strategy, we have our team Canada trade missions that Minister Ng has been taking to some of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Part of those delegations are women-owned businesses or women leaders in business. We want to ensure that women also have access to these new, growing markets through our trade commissioner services, so they're providing a great service to those who want to trade with the rest of the world.

For those watching at home, the minister will be taking a couple more delegations to the Indo-Pacific region. If you're interested, look up "trade commissioner services" and please submit your application.

What I've heard on the ground, speaking with many of the businesses that have been on these trade delegations, is that they enable them to grow into new markets that they've never been a part of. It's helped them acquire businesses in those markets, and there are many success stories that come out of it. That's why we want to ensure that we continue doing these team Canada trade missions through our Indo-Pacific strategy.

Maybe I can turn to Madame Fortier, online.

Madame Fortier, I have the same type of questioning in terms of priorities that you think the government should be focused on. Are there certain programs that we should be funding more of, in your opinion?

• (1825)

The Chair: I apologize, but you'll have to be brief again.

[Translation]

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: We would certainly like to be able to continue supporting the women entrepreneurs we've been helping for a few years through our Dimension E program. To date, we have supported up to 700 agricultural producers in Canada. As part of our program, we offer free consultations with notaries, lawyers, tax experts and marketing advisers.

We were able to set up our Dimension E program through government grants. More funding would enable us to continue to offer the program and make the kind of progress we've seen in recent years across Canada.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Monsieur Savard-Tremblay for two minutes and then Mr. Desjarlais for two minutes, and that's all the time we have.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Fortier, I'm going to continue with you, if you don't mind.

On March 26, 2024, the Réseau des femmes d'affaires du Québec announced the launch of the Maïa inclusive growth project across Canada. The project aims to provide information, networking opportunities and advice to women entrepreneurs wishing to access new markets.

A representative of the Réseau came here recently and said that Quebec was somewhat ahead in this area thanks to its institutions and its more hands-on approach. Do you agree with that?

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: Since the Fédération des agricultrices du Québec is the only organization in Canada so heavily geared towards women in agriculture, I do believe that we are ahead of the other provinces.

We're starting to expand our program into Ontario. The province came knocking on Quebec's door to ask for help setting up a program similar to Dimension E for women farmers in Ontario. The Yukon has also contacted our federation, as have other provinces, to obtain assistance for women farmers across Canada.

[English]

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I'll leave it at that.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Desjarlais, please, for two minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you again to all of the witnesses for being present for this study.

It's important that as a country we look at imperative ways that will guarantee the increase of women entrepreneurs and a deep integration within our domestic economy, but of course our international economy needs to see a much more significant increase in the participation of women in these systems.

It's clear that many of these systems are working, but they could obviously be better. There's a lot that can be learned from the testimony you gave today.

I want to turn to Ms. Fortier, related to her work in agriculture.

In Alberta, we have a huge number of agricultural producers. Of course, those challenges are quite unique, in the sense that right near us are.... Saskatchewan and parts of central Alberta have these historically large, immense farms. These large, immense farms are often inherited and have this inheritance mechanism, which is passing land down to the next generation and the one after that, and so forth. That allows for a guaranteed participation of families with access to that kind of business.

However, for new individuals, women who want to get involved in agriculture, those who haven't had the opportunity, unlike yourself, Ms. Fortier, to be raised in an agricultural family....

I was raised in a beef-producing family, so I know the advantages that come along with being raised on a ranch, what it means to have calving season, etc. It's something that you get in your bones and something that doesn't really leave your body. It's part of you; it's part of your DNA when you're a producer. However, for those who want to get involved in the industry, who want to get their foot in the door, for lack of better words.... What would you advise women who want to get involved in this and don't necessarily share our agricultural upbringing?

[Translation]

Mrs. Valérie Fortier: The Fédération des agricultrices du Québec has a number of programs to help women start or grow their businesses and even to facilitate business transfers.

We are starting to travel around Canada, since we get invited to events to talk to women farmers about our Dimension E program, which we would like to expand across Canada. The program is very good for networking. It helps women by providing lists of names of agricultural tax experts and even real estate agents specializing in agriculture. Those are hard to find in Quebec, and I imagine the same is true in the other provinces. Agriculture is really a world of its own, and the regulations are often different from those that apply to regular trade.

This is a program that we developed in Quebec to help women farmers. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of farms with women owners or co-owners has increased from about 4% to 27%. Quebec is making good progress. If it can be done, our federation would be pleased to expand its program into the other provinces to help other women farmers make the same progress.

• (1830)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to our very valuable witnesses. It was an immense amount of information. Thank you, all, for being with us today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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