

Women and Social Enterprise: Perspectives on Feminine Leadership in Alternative Economic Business Models

Executive Summary

Introduction:

The Women in Social Enterprise (WiSE) Collective supports women-led social enterprises across Scotland. These organisations provide care, employment and local development services that are frequently undervalued in mainstream business models which tends to focus on growth and scale.

This research examines feminine-informed leadership approaches, which are often more relational, driven by values and inclined toward collaboration. The report then looks at how this shapes these enterprises and contributes to alternative economic frameworks, offering insights and recommendations for Scotland's Wellbeing Economy.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study is to investigate how social enterprises led by women are guided by this alternative form of leadership and how they begin, operate and impact communities throughout Scotland. It aims to:

- Understand the motivations and leadership traits featured in women-led social enterprises
- Identify challenges around governance, funding and policy
- Explore how social enterprise practices contribute to community wealth, wellbeing and inclusive and sustainable economic growth
- Provide recommendations based on the findings to inform policy, funding and support from a grassroots perspective.

Methodology:

The research was conducted and compiled over 18 months, using in-depth and qualitative methods, including:

- Extensive desk-based research drawing on previous studies and social enterprise census data.
- 16 interviews with women social enterprise leaders across diverse sectors and geographies.
- Fieldwork carried out at network meetings, residential sessions and focus groups.
- Analysis of Scottish social enterprise policy and funding landscapes
- Framing using feminist economic theory, which prioritises care, wellbeing and relationships as measures of value in the economy.

Key Findings:

1. **Feminine-Informed Leadership:** Women-led social enterprises exhibit leadership styles that are driven primarily by values, collaboration and relationships. This form of leadership prioritises wellbeing over profit. Leadership is shared, participatory and informed through lived experience.
2. **Emergence as a Response to Need:** Unlike traditional businesses, social enterprises are often established in response to local need. Many leaders had been carrying out community work for many years before they discovered the label of social enterprise.
3. **Redefining Growth:** Scale or turnover is often not the main driving factor behind women-led social enterprises. Growth is measured in terms of relational impact and support of the establishment of new enterprises; success is defined by robust networks, community resilience and a collective environment of wellbeing.
4. **Innovation in Governance:** Boards reflect lived experience, collective leadership and show accountability to respective communities and networks, not solely funders.

5. **Care as Infrastructure:** Labour centred around care and relationships is frequently undervalued and underfunded in traditional business models but underpins much of the work undertaken by social enterprises. As a result, women leaders are at risk of burnout and an unequal distribution of resources.
6. **Policy and Funding Misalignment:** Current funding models prefer scale/efficiency/roll-out and measure growth based on these metrics. Policies which are gender-neutral in nature, fail to recognise women-led social enterprises and their strengths.
7. **Diverse Leadership Strengths:** Leaders from different backgrounds and marginalised contexts create a working environment built on inclusivity, accessibility and safety. In turn, this demonstrates innovation beyond conventional business models.

Recommendations:

For Policymakers:

- Diversify funding in order to support place-based social enterprises.
- Intersectional and gendered frameworks applied to social enterprise policy.
- Independent democratic business models identified as a core infrastructure
- Recognise the role of care and prevention as central to the economy.
- Resources to be distributed equally across sectors.

For Intermediaries & Support Bodies:

- Business support available that is gender-sensitive and specific to social enterprises
- Design policies in collaboration with women social enterprise leaders.
- Consider teaching feminine-informed leadership practices through training.
- Invest in relational rather than transactional networks as a way to build and foster a sense of collaboration, trust and resilience.

For Research & Evaluation:

- Carry out long-term research on social enterprises led by women and analyse how they operate in comparison to commercial, profit-led businesses.
- Co-produce research with social enterprise leaders with lived experience.
- At a global level, interlocal studies that benchmark Scotland's social enterprise practice and impact.
- Investigate how diverse and care-focused models of leadership support community resilience.
- An analysis of how these approaches in social enterprise help to deliver Community Wealth towards the Wellbeing Economy.

Implementation:

To implement these recommendations, social enterprise support organisations and policymakers can:

1. **Align Funding:** Introduce patient capital, microfinance and seed funding tailored to projects focused on relationships and care.
2. **Create Gender-Responsive Policy:** Design policies that have women and marginalised groups at the centre.
3. **Develop Networks:** Support relational networks where mentorship programmes, training and peer support are prioritised in order to strengthen resilience in the Sector.
4. **Capacity Building:** Provide training in feminine-informed, trauma-informed and collective leadership grounded in lived experience and focused on building community wealth.
5. **Embed Alternative Forms of Measurement:** Consider evaluation beyond growth, turnover and replicability towards forms of measurement that include wellbeing, inclusion, environmental and social impact.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, women-led social enterprises in Scotland are effectively demonstrating alternative business models focused on care, collaboration and community wealth. These organisations are leading the way in working towards a

Wellbeing Economy by showing that regenerative growth is feasible without large-scale expansion. In order to accommodate this, Scotland must align policy and funding with grassroots practices that are currently operating successfully. Small shifts towards valuing and resourcing care-focused business practices and amplifying lived experiences will enable the sector to scale impact, rather than size. In turn, this will position Scotland as a world leader in sustainable and inclusive economic development.