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

Presented by the Women in Social Enterprise Collective (WiSE)

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Abstract

At a time when prevailing economic and leadership models are struggling to respond to escalating social, ecological, and economic crises, this paper asks a fundamental question: are there practical ingredients observable within existing women-led social enterprises that could inform the design of an economy capable of sustaining people, place, and planet?

Drawing on a review of social entrepreneurship and feminist economic literature, along with qualitative research with women-led social enterprises across Scotland, the study examines alternative economic logics already operating on the ground. Rather than prioritising scale, replication, and turnover as primary indicators of success, the women-led social enterprises explored here work through creative, care-based, relational, and purpose-driven practices that align economic activity with community wellbeing, social connection, and environmental responsibility.

The findings identify shared characteristics across diverse contexts, including non-linear, deeply networked growth pathways, with organisational and governance structures designed around human capacity and lived experience. There was a clear understanding of profit as a vital tool to enable impact rather than an end in itself. While the research focuses on women-led social enterprises, the analysis moves beyond gender through intersectional networks to surface a set of leadership and organisational principles that challenge extractive, linear growth-centric norms. The paper argues that the task ahead is not to invent new economic models, but to recognise, resource, and protect those that already exist, and to support those already advancing more resilient, community wealth-building and wellbeing-oriented futures.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the breadth and range of research and data that have informed this study. The robustness of the evidence base is supported by drawing on a wide range of sources across the social enterprise and inclusion landscape, ensuring that insights are grounded in varied perspectives and contexts.

Our primary focus was on women-led social enterprises, with a sample designed to capture diversity across geography, business stage (from new start-ups to well-established organisations), thematic focus (including wellbeing services, place-based initiatives, and product-oriented enterprises), and organisational size (from single-staff operations to larger employers). The sample size is consistent with established qualitative research norms. Comparable studies, including the Social Enterprise Census and *The ACCESS Report* (a collaboration between Dechomai, Firstport and Social Investment Scotland in 2024), have employed similar sample sizes, demonstrating that our approach is both standard and methodologically sound.

Findings were contextualised within academic literature, broader census data and feedback from wider networks to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the sector and to support practical, evidence-informed conclusions.

We are grateful to all participants for their time and insights, which made this research possible. Several of the interviews were conducted in person, in situ on the SE premises and all participants contributed several hours of precious time to share their experiences. Their engagement has been key in capturing the complexity and richness of the social enterprise ecosystem. Thanks also to members of the various social enterprise networks who welcomed us into their meetings during the fieldwork phase, as well as the audience at Glasgow Caledonian University when interim findings were presented. Feedback from those events was invaluable. We also extend our sincere thanks to Professor Michael Roy of the University of Stirling for his thoughtful and constructive peer review of this paper, which strengthened the clarity and rigour of the final manuscript.

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List of Abbreviations

AEBM - Alternative Economic Business Models
BME - Black and Minority Ethnic
CBE - Community-based Enterprise
CWB - Community Wealth Building
EHMS - Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy
IDBM - Inclusive and Democratic Business Models
GEM - Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
GVA - Gross Value Added
SE - Social Enterprise
SSEC - Scotland's Social Enterprise Census
WE - Wellbeing Economy
WEF - World Entrepreneurship Forum

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Definitions

Alternative economic paradigm: a broad approach to the economy that prioritises social, ecological, and relational goals over purely profit-oriented ones (drawing together the ideas supported by Raworth (2017) and Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2013).

Alternative economic business model: operational approaches that put alternative economic paradigms into practice, including social enterprise and other initiatives guided by sustainable economic principles (Mair and Martí, 2006; Bocken *et al.*, 2014).

Bricolage: the creative use of available resources, minimising dependence on external inputs and combining or recombining them as needed (Di Domenico, Haugh and Tracey, 2010; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016).

Community wealth building: an approach to local economic development that aims to retain wealth within a community and ensure it is more fairly generated, circulated, and shared. It is often described as a practical way to deliver Wellbeing Economy objectives at the local and regional level through local anchor institutions and structural economic levels to retain wealth locally and address inequalities (Scottish Government, 2022b, no date a).

Cultural planning: integrating local cultural place-based resources, values and identities into wider planning and development (Bianchini and Ghilardi, 2007).

Feminine: traits and/or behaviours that are culturally and socially associated with women, as well as a mode of organising that centres collective wellbeing and long-term ecological and social balance (Waring, 1988; Fletcher, 2004; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Badour, 2025). Does not denote women exclusively.

Feminine-informed leadership: a socially constructed, relational, values-driven approach that prioritises collaboration, inclusivity, and social and environmental outcomes, reflecting behaviours culturally associated with femininity but enacted by any gender (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Fletcher, 2004).

Relationality: quality or state of being centred around relationships with how people connect, interact, and respond to one another in a social context. Based on the word ‘relational’ as defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2026) as a form or description of a connection between things.

Rhizomatic: refers metaphorically to non-hierarchical, interconnected and multiple paths of growth (drawing on the botany of rhizomes that grow underground and spread horizontally, generating new growth from multiple points) (Deleuze, 1987).

Social enterprise: enterprises that sell goods and/or services and reinvest profits or surplus into primary social or ecological goals (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2026). In this paper, community-led enterprises are considered a type of social enterprise that specifically addresses local needs and wellbeing. Accordingly, the term ‘social enterprise’ encompasses both social and community-led enterprises.

Wellbeing economy: for conceptual clarity, in this paper the term Wellbeing Economy refers to Scotland’s shift beyond GDP-led growth towards an integrated Wellbeing Economy that prioritises social justice, environmental sustainability and inclusive prosperity, *with Community Wealth Building serving as the practical mechanism to enact these objectives,* including restructuring economic power through progressive procurement, fair work, democratic ownership and local wealth circulation (Scottish Government, 2022a; Scottish Parliament, 2026).

Women-led social enterprise: social enterprises in which women hold primary leadership or senior decision-making roles.

Introduction

In this momentous time of change, late-stage capitalist structures continue to wreak havoc on our economic, social and ecological systems, creating complex, wicked problems that seem impossible to solve. There is an urgency to reimagine and revive structures that nurture and sustain a more interconnected, holistic approach in which people, the planet, and all living things thrive today and in the future. Sustainable development, which gained widespread popularity by the 1987 Brundtland Report, emphasised development that could meet present needs without compromising future generations. It considers three pillars, those of economic prosperity, environmental health, and social equity, as development. Over the past 25 to 30 years, alternative development frameworks, or alternative economic business models (AEBMs), have emerged and are being explored. They place importance on the three pillars with profit directed towards environmental and/or social welfare (Emerson, 2003; Bocken *et al.*, 2014; Raworth, 2017; Hinton and Maclurcan, 2019; Vermeersch and Ngomsik, 2024). Many of these alternatives emerge at the community level to address local issues (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). They are typically guided by and draw on place-based capacities and resources (Smith and McColl, 2016). They also form within a holistic, systems-based lens (De Ruysscher *et al.*, 2017). One of these alternative business models is social enterprise (SE).

What do we think about when someone says *social enterprise*? For some, especially those working in government policy, SE is a common term. However, it is essential to take note that it is not widely recognised. In fact, this paper will show that some businesses and community groups have been operating an SE for decades, often without recognising them as such. For the general public, an SE may be viewed as an organisation or business that ‘does good work’ by combining business with social and/or environmental goals. Or, as is often the case, as a community-led organisation responding to local needs, and generating some income to meet those needs (Aitken, 2021). At its core, SE aims to generate social impact or solve

social or ecological problems using entrepreneurial approaches (Teasdale, 2012; Morrison, Ramsey and Bond, 2017; Social Enterprise Scotland, 2026).

SE is a global phenomenon embraced by multiple governments, the private sector, the non-profit and/or third sector, and community groups (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Pestoff, 2014). In some cases, SE is celebrated as an economic driver, as evidenced by its contributions to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of approximately 2% and 10% in OECD countries (OECD, 2023b). In other cases, success is measured by environmental outcomes and social impact (Noya, 2015). Moreover, it is recognised as a platform within the broader social economy for addressing socio-economic inequalities, such as reducing the gender gap (OECD, 2023a). Of note, *women-led* SEs and *women employed* in SEs can increase resilience, equity, and poverty reduction (ICRW and Acumen, 2015) and work toward the Sustainable Development Goals (Mas-Tur, 2022).

One can argue that women-led SEs draw on *feminine-informed leadership* approaches, understood as a socially constructed, relational approach to leadership (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Fletcher, 2004). This approach prioritises collaboration, values-driven practice, and inclusivity (Badour, 2025). It prioritises social and environmental outcomes, which Eagly and Carli (2007) observed as culturally feminine qualities. While women-led SEs refer to *who* is leading an SE, feminine leadership refers to *how* leadership is practised. Importantly, feminine leadership is not exclusive to women. It transcends gender identity, and not all women-led SEs practice it. Understanding how this approach shapes leadership within SE is crucial, especially when building resilience and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is a space where women have greater influence, increased participation, and drive sustainable change (Waring, 1988; Borquist and de Bruin, 2019; Social Value Lab, 2024). Therefore, this paper defines feminine-informed leadership as a socially constructed, relational, values-driven approach that prioritises collaboration, inclusivity, and social and environmental outcomes, reflecting behaviours culturally associated with femininity but enacted by any gender.

The Women in Social Enterprise (WiSE) Collective is a Scotland-wide network of women leaders working across SE, established to share learning, build peer support, and influence policy and practice through lived experience. This study, developed in collaboration with the collective (see “Appendix One: Women in Social Enterprise Collective Research Proposal”), examines how feminine-informed leadership both shapes and is shaped by women-led SEs. It explores the characteristics, motivations and skills that enable these leaders to thrive, alongside the structural and institutional challenges they face. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1) the inspiration or need for setting up an organisation,
2) the factors that influenced the decisions around the choice and development of governance structure, and
3) the challenges and barriers experienced in setting up and running an SE.

Understanding these elements is crucial for recognising the broader impact of women-led SEs in responding to complex, systemic challenges and for informing approaches that support sustainable social, environmental and economic change. By combining insights into enabling factors with awareness of pressures and obstacles, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how women-led SEs can reshape economic development and strengthen communities.

The research process included embedded fieldwork through participation in network meetings, focus groups and residential ‘away days’, where the study’s aims and scope were shared and where participants expressed interest or volunteered to take part in the research. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were then conducted with 16 self-selecting participants in Scotland, all of whom hold leadership positions, and primarily identify as women social entrepreneurs.[1]

Building on this framing, the study’s qualitative design was structured to examine these examples in context, exploring leadership practices, governance systems and economic models in women-led SEs in Scotland, while prioritising in-depth, context-sensitive insights over

[1]

statistical generalisability. Drawing on a small, data-rich sample of women leaders reflecting on their practice, it identifies patterns and explanatory themes, providing a snapshot in time rather than longitudinal analysis. Situated within Scotland's specific policy, funding, and cultural landscape, the research involved 18 months of sustained sector engagement, including interviews and observation, with close attention to participants' language and meaning-making to ensure rigour and coherence.

While this study centres on women-led SEs, this focus is methodological rather than essentialist. The research participants provided a foundation for examining leadership and organisational practices, offering insights into the diversity of approaches across the sector. This approach does not assume that such leadership practices are inherently gendered nor exclusive to women; similar approaches are evident across LGBTQ+, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), disability-led and neuro-divergent SE networks, including those led by men. What unites these varied contexts is a shared commitment to inclusive, community-oriented, and socially engaged practices. While the research recognises the importance of intersectional dynamics, it does not employ intersectionality as the primary analytical lens.

The study adopts a feminist economic theory framework to guide the analysis of the findings, the literature review, and the study as a whole. Feminist economics offers a critical lens to capitalist economic frameworks that measure success by markets and growth. Rather than beginning with production or profit, feminist economists reconceptualise economic value beyond market activity to include care, social purpose, and sustainability, framing an economy as one that sustains and enhances life (Waring, 1988; Folbre, 2006; Nelson, 2018; Pérez Orozco, 2022; Moser, 2024; Pla-Julián, 2025). In contrast, capitalist economic models systematically undervalue the forms of labour that make all other economic activity possible, including care work, community-building, and the stewardship of shared resources (activities that have historically been feminised and rendered invisible) (Power, 2004; Folbre, 2006; Elson, 2017; Moser, 2024). Viewed through these social and ecological perspectives, the framework highlights how women leaders' motivations, governance decisions, and responses to structural

barriers contribute to the development of AEBMs (Elson, 1995; Shiva, 2010). Feminist economics, therefore, expands conventional understandings of value beyond profit alone, incorporating wellbeing, equity, and ecological balance as fundamental economic outcomes.

This body of work also challenges the assumption of infinite growth, emphasising instead the limits of extractive expansion and the need for relational and generative systems grounded in interdependence and reciprocity (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Pérez Orozco, 2014). Within this framework, economies are understood as plural and diverse, encompassing a wide range of practices such as exchange, gifting, mutual aid, and care alongside market-based trade and innovation (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Applying a feminist economic lens to SE highlights how this leadership redefines what counts as economic value. Positioning social and environmental priorities as core infrastructure, feminist economics provides a framework that makes possible both analysis and support for democratic forms of leadership within women-led SEs.

A literature review situates SE within the broader context of AEBMs that continue to emerge in response to capitalism. Examples of different economic paradigms and models, such as the care economy and solidarity economy, will be shared to highlight the embedded feminist economic values already in practice. This leads to an examination of women-led SEs and an exploration of the characteristics of social entrepreneurs. We consider why SE is predominantly led by women, including the structural barriers that may both push and pull women towards SE. The key findings are then outlined, followed by a discussion. The findings are significant for practitioners, policymakers, and academics alike, as they deepen our understanding of the intersection between gendered leadership and SE and recommendations are presented.

Feminine Leadership

In Alternative Economic Business Models

AEBMs typically develop in response to the limitations of market-led approaches (Polanyi, 1944; Raworth, 2017). In capitalist economic systems, success is often measured by indicators such as scale, efficiency, and financial growth, with seemingly little attention paid to social or environmental consequences (Polanyi, 1944; Raworth, 2017). Feminist economists question these capitalist measures, arguing that these systems ignore work that is invaluable and that sustains everyday life and ecological wellbeing, including care work, community maintenance, social reproduction and environmental stewardship (Waring, 1988; Folbre, 2001; Power, 2004; Nelson, 2008; Elson, 2017; Shiva and Mies, 2023; Moser, 2024; Pla-Julián, 2025).

Building on Williams' (1958) conception of culture as a "whole way of life", prosperity, as understood within this research, is collective and relational rather than individual or accumulative. AEBMs embed economic activity within everyday practices, social relationships, and shared systems of meanings, drawing on insights from feminist and care economics (Folbre, 2006; Allard, Davidson and Matthaei, 2008; Dengler and Lang, 2022; Pérez Orozco, 2022), social and solidarity economy (Polanyi, 1944; Allard, Davidson and Matthaei, 2008) and socio-ecological and wellbeing approaches (Raworth, 2017; Dengler and Lang, 2022). Rather than prioritising expansion or productivity in isolation, they value social purpose, environmental stewardship, and collective wellbeing alongside economic activity, refining growth in line with relational capacity, local context, and long-term resilience (Waring, 1988; Elson, 1995; Jackson, 2009; Raworth, 2017). By emphasising sufficiency, redistribution, cooperation and mutual care, AEBMs generate value for the social and ecological systems they affect (Jackson, 2009; Bauhardt and Harcourt, 2019).

This perspective resonates with feminist economic scholarship, which understands care, social purpose, relationality, and value judgments as constitutive of economic life (Folbre, 2006;

Sultana, 2014; Pérez Orozco, 2022). By recognising that economic activity is socially and culturally embedded, these models highlight how relational decision-making, community stewardship, and women's leadership can foster alternative, sustainable economies (Agarwal, 1997; Shiva, 2010). Recent feminist scholarship reinforces this perspective, such as feminist degrowth approaches that highlight the centrality of collective care and socio-ecological wellbeing in economic practice (Dengler and Lang, 2022), and a more recent feminist macroeconomic review that emphasises the structural importance of care and relational economies in shaping sustainable alternatives (Zuazu, 2024). In this way, AEBMs reflect William's vision of culture as a lens for understanding economic activity embedded in social and ecological relationships.

Within women-led SEs, economic activity reflects cultural planning[2] practices in which culture shapes relationships, rhythms, and responsibilities that sustain social cohesion, environmental care, and ecological balance over time (Williams, 1958; Wheatley, 2024). Locally developed rules shape governance arrangements and decision-making processes in these collective systems, as well as shared norms and mutual trust, reflecting collective values, interdependence, and identity (Ostrom, 2015). These organisations operate as service providers and income-generating entities, while also becoming test beds for creative experimentation across policy domains, where social systems are negotiated and reshaped (Battilana, 2018). Feminist economics highlights the economic significance of relational and cultural labour, where economic activity seems inseparable from social and ethical considerations (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Elson, 2017; Moser, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives provide a robust basis for analysing feminine-informed leadership that shapes innovative SE that is simultaneously economic, cultural, and social.

AEBMs align with values historically coded as "feminine", such as cooperation, empathy, sustainability, reciprocity, and relational accountability, which are understood here not as inherently gendered traits but as political-economic orientations prioritising care,

[2] Cultural planning integrates local cultural place-based resources, values and identities into wider planning and development (Bianchini and Ghilardi, 2007).orientations prioritising

interdependence, and human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2013; Tronto, 2013; Fraser, 2020). These values contrast with the extractive, competitive, and hierarchical logics that dominate capitalist enterprise, emphasising “enoughness” over accumulation, care over control, and interdependence over individualism (Elson, 2002; Gibson-Graham, 2013; Raworth, 2017). Feminine-informed approaches do not denote women exclusively but rather a mode of organising that centres collective wellbeing, promotes long-term ecological and social balance and understands economic activity as bounded by ecological limits rather than driven by perpetual growth (Shiva, 2015; Raworth, 2017; Pla-Julián, 2025).

Building on these values, feminist economists such as Waring (1988), Elson (1995), Agarwal (1997), Folbre (2006), and Nelson (2018) have long argued that care and relational work constitute the hidden scaffolding of all production, including invisible labour, which underpins broader economic systems. Goldin (2024) highlights how women’s labour, both paid and unpaid, has historically shaped economic activity despite being undervalued. Within AEBMs, accountability is relational rather than hierarchical, enacted ethically through social and ecological relationships rather than imposed regulation (Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Organisational logic embeds care for people and the environment, recognising wellbeing as a prerequisite for sustainability rather than a by-product of economic success (Fletcher, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Raworth, 2017).

Several alternative economies and business models highlight ways of organising economic activity that challenge mainstream, capitalist, profit-driven paradigms. At a conceptual level, an *alternative economic paradigm* refers to approaches that prioritise social, ecological, and relational goals over purely financial accumulation (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, 2013; Raworth, 2017). Examples include the Wellbeing Economy, which places societal wellbeing at the centre of economic success, and the Care Economy, which foregrounds care as foundational to economic activity (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Scottish Government, 2025b). Furthermore, an *alternative economic business model* operationalises these paradigms, translating these principles into tangible practices and structures, such as SE, community-based enterprise

(CBE), or initiatives inspired by circular or solidarity-economy principles (Mair and Martí, 2006; Bocken *et al.*, 2014). While paradigms provide the ethical and conceptual orientation, business models enact these ideas into concrete forms.

In a Scottish context, government support for the SE sector (an AEBM) operates within the Wellbeing Economy (the alternative economic paradigm), reflecting approaches grounded in care, collaboration, and community; Table One: *Alternative Economic Paradigms and Business Models* summarises these paradigms and models.

Table One: Alternative Economic Paradigms and Business Models

Alternative Economic Paradigms	
The Circular Economy	A complementary framework for understanding how value can be retained and regenerated over time. It challenges the linear "take–make–dispose" model by prioritising repair, reuse, repurposing, and regeneration of materials and resources. Widely articulated in both policy and academic literature, including work by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013).
The Care Economy	Highlights the economic significance of caregiving, both paid and unpaid, as central to human and planetary survival. It reframes "dependence" as interdependence, valuing relational work as productive and essential (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).
The Social and Solidarity Economy	Expands the care economy lens to include all forms of collective economic practice grounded in mutual aid, democratic ownership, and ethical production, thereby effectively challenging conventional economic practices. This economy needs to move 'beyond the fringe' and avoid Western capitalist norms (Utting, 2015; Eynaud *et al.*, 2019).
The Wellbeing Economy (WE)	This economy places people and the environment at its centre, based on principles of equality, sustainability, prosperity and resilience (Scottish Government, 2025b).
Alternative Economic Business Models	
Community Wealth Building (CWB)	An approach to local economic development that aims to retain wealth within a community and ensure it is more fairly generated, circulated, and shared. CWB is often described as a practical delivery model for achieving a Wellbeing Economy at the local level (Scottish Parliament, 2026). The Scottish Parliament passed the *Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill* in February 2026.

Community-Based Enterprise (CBE)	These enterprises prioritise *local* needs and participatory decision-making over shareholder profit, reinvesting surpluses into *local* infrastructure (Scottish Government, 2016b). The community's social and cultural context shapes the goals, decision-making processes and the way value is generated (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006). All CBEs are SEs in a local sense, but not all SEs are community-based.
Social Enterprise (SE)	SEs sell goods and services where profits or surpluses are reinvested into primary social/ecological goals (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2026).
Scottish Context: Linking the Wellbeing Economy, Community Wealth Building and Social Enterprise	
In Scotland, support for SE was transferred from the Third Sector portfolio to the Wellbeing Economy portfolio in August 2023, to signify an explicit alignment with the government's wider economic, social, and environmental strategy. Although SE contributes to wellbeing outcomes, scholars caution that it remains analytically and structurally distinct from the broader systemic framework of a Wellbeing Economy, with constraints relating to scale, metrics, measurement, and resources (Roy, 2021). Within this policy landscape, CWB and the Wellbeing Economy are closely interconnected frameworks that seek to reorient local economic development away from profit maximisation and growth alone towards people, place, and long-term wellbeing. While the Wellbeing Economy provides the overarching normative and strategic direction, CWB operates as a place-based implementation framework. Adopted as a Scottish Government policy in February 2026, CWB advances local wealth retention, inclusive and democratic ownership, and fair work practices, thereby embedding SEs within a wider restructuring of economic power that promotes prosperity, equity, and ecological sustainability. For conceptual clarity, in this paper, the term 'Wellbeing Economy' refers to Scotland's shift beyond GDP-led growth towards an integrated Wellbeing Economy that prioritises social justice, environmental sustainability and inclusive prosperity, *with Community Wealth Building serving as the practical mechanism to enact these objectives,* including restructuring economic power through progressive procurement, fair work, democratic ownership and local wealth circulation (Scottish Government, 2022a; Scottish Parliament, 2026).	

Together, these feminine economic values, paradigms and models reveal that the AEBM economy is not a niche or idealised alternative. Instead, it comprises practical, response-grounded business models that evidence a circular, regenerative, co-operative, and socially embedded economy. By centring care, reciprocity and ecological responsibility, these approaches redefine value as something created through relationships rather than extracted from them. They demonstrate that economic life can be organised around sustaining communities and environments, rather than depleting them. Importantly, they also show that

feminine-informed leadership is not a theoretical abstraction but an already-emergent paradigm that is advanced daily by women-led SEs, a reality increasingly recognised in Scotland with its shift towards a Wellbeing Economy.

Women-led Social Enterprise: Setting the Context

Over the past 15 to 20 years, a growing body of scholarly work has emerged on SE and gender. Within the broader context of women's entrepreneurship literature, which gained a foothold in entrepreneurship studies in the 1980s, research on women's SE literature remains fairly recent (Akter, Rahman and Radicic, 2022). The literature on SEs is highly interdisciplinary, spanning economics, business, gender, and sociology, among others (Akter, Rahman, and Radicic, 2022), and has garnered attention and support from both the government and corporate sectors. In Scotland, the SE landscape is substantial, comprising over 6,000 SEs, alongside intermediary organisations, and government support (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2025). This landscape is illustrated by the *Social Enterprise Support Map* designed by Bold Studio (see "Appendix Two: Social Enterprise Support Map").

Demonstrable trends indicate a steady rise in SE and women-led SEs as evidenced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2025 and the *Scottish Social Enterprise Censuses* in 2016, 2019, 2021 and 2024. As described by WEF in its report *The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data 2013 - 2023*, approximately 10 million SEs operate worldwide, generating £1.5 trillion in revenue annually and employing 200 million people (World Economic Forum, 2024). The most recent *Social Enterprise Census* highlights the scale of the sector in Scotland, with over 6,100 SEs generating £5.2 billion in annual revenue and employing more than 90,000 full-time equivalent staff (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2025). The WEF report also states that globally, on average, one in two SEs is led by a woman (compared to one in five in commercial enterprise) and that in some countries, such as Latvia and Sweden, almost 70% of SEs are women-led (World Economic Forum, 2024). In a Scottish context, the 2024 census

indicates that 61% of SEs are women-led, but it is also important to note that in its 2021 census, that percentage was as high as 71% (CEIS, 2021). Additionally, the makeup of women employees in SE in Scotland is 64% (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2025). This data suggests that the SE sector displays greater gender equity in overall employment and better leadership opportunities for women than the commercial entrepreneurship sector.

SE leaders operate within a complex ecosystem of relationships that excludes the commercial or for-profit structure of shareholders and investors. *The Voluntary Code of Practice for Social Enterprise in Scotland*, created in 2012, states that some SEs have community shares with limited interest (shareholders are paid interest, not a dividend), while others have a strict dividend payout (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2012). They are accountable to their beneficiaries, including community groups, volunteers, partner organisations, funders, and public bodies (Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern, 2006), which shapes how decisions are made. As de Bruin et al. (2023) note, SE leaders navigate these networks as part of a dynamic, relational ecosystem in which collaboration and co-creation with multiple stakeholders are central to sustaining impact. In comparison, we understand that commercial entrepreneurs are typically profit-driven, stakeholder-focused, serve a customer base, and are modelled with hierarchical governance structures (Trivedi and Stokols, 2011). Commercial business leaders may also take greater risks to gain market advantages or increase profits, and typically ‘fit the bill’ for capital and investor networks (Trivedi and Stokols, 2011).

We can begin to understand that SEs are innovative, creative, and adaptive as well as transparent and usually community or locally-based. Social entrepreneurs offer an alternative to corporate systems, and, more poignantly, challenge gender inequalities (Benavides-Espinosa and Mohedano-Suanes, 2012). At a deeper level, the research surfaces a significant and emerging link between SE and feminine-informed leadership, suggesting that these factors are not incidental but structurally connected within AEBMs. This interpretation is reinforced by global and Scottish data demonstrating both the steady growth of SEs and the comparatively

high proportion of women in leadership and employment within the sector, indicating that these dynamics are embedded in practice rather than rhetorical aspiration.

Characteristics of Social Enterprise Leaders

In line with findings from the broader literature on women's entrepreneurship, women social entrepreneurs are frequently described as altruistic, caring, socially minded, compassionate, empathetic, emotionally attuned, and generally averse to competitive behaviours (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020). They also tend to express greater concern for environmental sustainability and social equality, which, in turn, shapes more inclusive and participatory business practices (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020; Suseno and Abbott, 2021). These tendencies align closely with communal leadership traits, which chime in with the underlying ethos and operational logic of the SE model (Bernardino, Freitas Santos and Cadima Ribeiro, 2018; Gupta, Wieland and Turban, 2019). The *2016 - 2026 Scotland's Social Enterprise Strategy* highlights leadership development as a central factor in the success, sustainability and longevity of the SE sector (Scottish Government, 2016b). This underscores that leadership is not just a role but a defining characteristic that shapes how SEs operate and achieve a lasting impact.

SE leaders, above all, are driven by a social and/or environmental purpose. They are passionate about their communities and who they serve (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2026) and demonstrate resilience in the face of ongoing uncertainty, maintaining a clear social mission while navigating shifting demands from markets, public bodies, and local communities (Fischer, Wilsker and Young, 2011; Doherty, Haugh and Lyon, 2014). Decision-making is consistently described as values-led and ethically grounded (Fischer, Wilsker and Young, 2011), and there is an emphasis on capacity building through mentoring, skills development, and opportunities for participation (OECD, 2025). These priorities are central to both organisational sustainability and community empowerment (Pearce, 2003).

In examining the characteristics of SE leaders, it is important to situate this discussion within the development of the SE academic literature. While a widening body of work has emerged since the early 2000s, much of the initial scholarship focused on a more masculine, 'hero' narrative, highlighting traits such as protector, provider, and battle-driven qualities (Lewis and Henry, 2019). These traits stand in contrast to leadership qualities more commonly associated with care, collaboration, and stewardship. This meant, at the time, that academic literature largely overlooked the connection between feminine leadership traits and SE practice, thereby reinforcing existing gender stereotypes and structures despite claims that SE fostered empowerment and change (Clark Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016). Subsequent studies have echoed this concern (Dimitriadis *et al.*, 2017; Lewis and Henry, 2019), especially when SE is touted as transformative of gendered norms and structures. Moreover, some scholars argue that the SE field reproduces forms of modern sexism, denying gender-based inequities and resisting calls for greater equity (Gupta, Wieland and Turban, 2019). From the 2010s to the 2020s, the literature evolved toward a more agentic-structural approach, including the necessity to apply a gendered critique for SE research. As Humbert (2012) explains, this redirected the attention from 'sex' to 'gender', highlighting not *if* sex matters but *'how'* gender makes the difference.

Why is Social Enterprise Led by Women?

Building on this, a burgeoning field of research explores the connection between feminine traits and SE. These studies on female social entrepreneurship examine women's attitudes and characteristics and note that women place greater emphasis on the emotional and social aspects than men do (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020; de Bruin, Eversole and Woods, 2024). As mentioned, this supports a natural preference for socially oriented organisations, objectives or businesses, and financial motives are seen as a resource in making a social and/or environmental contribution (Humbert and Roomi, 2018). Financial return is not absent

from these models, but is seen as a means to an end and as part of a broader conception of value creation mainly focused on social and/or environmental aims (Mason *et al.*, 2009; Kay, Roy and Donaldson, 2016). These women-led SEs deliberately reorient enterprise toward relational, ecological, and social forms of value and demonstrate that economic viability and community wellbeing are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are mutually reinforcing. There is a greater purpose at play: one that tackles inequality, poverty, education inaccessibility, and ecological exploitation (Jeong and Yoo, 2022; Quaye *et al.*, 2024).

Many SEs operate at a small or community scale, typically serving local needs and embodying the ethical and social values of their owners (Social Value Lab and University of Glasgow, 2017; Social Enterprise Scotland, 2018). Levie and Hart (2011) confirm that women address local needs through SE, which aligns with gender-based theories of community engagement. Women are also better represented on boards at the local or community level (Lyon and Humbert, 2012). At the grassroots level, women focus less on social innovation and more on building local ecosystems (Lewis and Henry, 2019). This is supported by Teasdale *et al*. (2011) and is reflected in the 2019 SE Census (CEIS, 2019), where SEs have stepped in to take over public service delivery from the state. Women social entrepreneurs also indicate a local focus in their revenue and organisational structure, operating at a smaller scale (lower revenue and fewer full-time employees) (Huysentruyt, 2014).

Bricolage is highlighted here by making do with readily available resources, almost to the point of ‘bootstrapping’, while ensuring minimal reliance on external resources and combining and recombining them when necessary (Di Domenico, Haugh and Tracey, 2010; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016). It makes practical use of relationships, local knowledge, and social capital to keep organisations viable over time (Kwong, Tasavori and Wun-mei Cheung, 2017). Kimbu and Ngoasong (2016) share that bricolage is a key strategy for women social entrepreneurs to help navigate challenges and maximise available resources. Rosca, Agarwal and Brem (2020) also point out that women social entrepreneurs invest in and commit to networks for support to reduce uncertainty and Humbert (2012) argues that there is a heavy reliance on social capital.

In rural contexts, bricolage is highly prevalent and valued, as rural areas typically work with what they have in creative and innovative ways (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020).

Push, Pull and Purpose: Women's Pathways into Social Enterprise

The literature on commercial entrepreneurship extensively explores the push (necessity-driven) and/or pull (opportunity-driven) motivations, drawing attention to labour market conditions, institutional environments, and opportunity structures, as can be seen by authors Stephan, Hart and Drews (2015), Dawson and Henley (2012), and Kapasi et al. (2022). These dynamics are also reflected in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) reports in the United Kingdom and Scotland, which explore economic, social and institutional drivers (Mwaura *et al.*, 2025). Recent systematic reviews by Giannella et al. (2025) and Lingappa and Rodrigues (2023) show that the interplay of structural constraints and opportunity-driven aspirations shapes women's entrepreneurship. Complementary studies in women's social entrepreneurship further reveal how these motivations are typically channelled through enterprise models that prioritise social purpose and collective wellbeing (Bernardino, Freitas Santos and Cadima Ribeiro, 2018; Borquist and de Bruin, 2019).

Research also indicates that the distinction between push and pull motives can be ambiguous and can differ between women and men (Dawson and Henley, 2012). While there is a higher chance of a clear, singular push or pull motive in commercial entrepreneurship, motivations tend to be a blend of both in SE (Gabarret, Vedel and Decaillon, 2025). For example, women social entrepreneurs frequently connect their ventures to personal or professional experiences, underscoring the complexity and non-linearity of their motivations (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020). We might also extrapolate that social entrepreneurship is more accessible to women, based on better representation as outlined in the most recent Scottish *Social Enterprise Census*, and that they experience a narrower pay gap compared to other sectors (Teasdale et al., 2011). There may also be structural barriers, especially

socio-economic factors, that push women toward alternative models. There are several reasons why this may be the case.

First, studies indicate that gendered differences in risk perception and financial constraints influence women's sectoral choice in entrepreneurship, typically in less capital-intensive, service-oriented sectors (Gimenez-Jimenez *et al.*, 2022; OECD/GWEP, 2025). Women may choose sectors perceived as lower risk because they align with social and/or community-oriented values. Second, women tend to face obstacles that make funding more difficult, such as possible biases in lending, stricter risk assessments or even a lack of investor networks, especially if growth and scale are priorities (Benavides-Espinosa and Mohedano-Suanes, 2012; Humbert and Roomi, 2018; OECD/GWEP, 2025). Therefore, accessing financing remains one of the most considerable obstacles for women social entrepreneurs. Third, women's pathways into SE are often shaped by structural and institutional factors, including the need to address unmet community needs arising from market failure or gaps in public services. While more research is needed to directly link *women's* motivations to these systemic gaps, existing studies demonstrate that SEs often step in to fill them (Hayllar and Wettenhall, 2013; Steiner and Teasdale, 2019; Beaton and Dowin Kennedy, 2021; Muldoon *et al.*, 2022). Studies of women social entrepreneurs also highlight a sense of moral compulsion, a felt responsibility to act when existing institutions fail to address social, cultural, or ecological harm (Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020; Suseno and Abbott, 2021). Given that women lead the majority of SEs, this suggests a potential link between women's entry into the sector and the opportunities created by market or service withdrawals. Fourth, evidence suggests that women continue to face disrupted career progression in conventional employment settings (Teasdale *et al.*, 2011; Suseno and Abbott, 2021). Even with higher levels of education, training, and skills, they frequently encounter fewer opportunities for promotion and advancement (Benavides-Espinosa and Mohedano-Suanes, 2012). These structural inequalities contribute to what De Bruin, Eversole, and Woods (2024) describe as push factors into SE, including

prosocial values shaped by family, work, and life experiences; critical life events that prompt career reassessment; and culturally embedded norms and meanings.

To highlight the ambiguity surrounding push and pull factors, motivations such as identifying a social need or stepping in to provide a community service, can be seen as pull factors; however, when framed as a response to unmet community needs, they can also be interpreted as push factors, leading some authors to consider SE to be more push-driven (Priya M and Venkatesh, 2019). Other motivations, such as personal and social values, are also considered both push and pull factors (Humphris, 2017). For example, women enter SE not because they lack opportunities within conventional careers, but because remaining within those systems becomes ethically untenable (Perrons, 2015). This is often described as a refusal to continue work that conflicts with deeply held values, even where that work offers security, status, and long-term financial reward (Mair and Martí, 2006; Pérez Orozco, 2014). Feminist economic theory helps explain this pattern, framing women's entrepreneurial action as a form of moral agency rooted in care, responsibility, and life-sustaining priorities rather than individual advancement (Ahl, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2013; Tronto, 2013; Elson, 2017). In this sense, SE becomes not an alternative career path, but a necessary one, the only available space in which values, work, and responsibilities can be brought into alignment. One final consideration is that women social entrepreneurs seem to be more influenced by a combination of motivational factors than their male counterparts (Yamini, Soloveva and Peng, 2022).

We also understand that there is typically a smaller gender gap in SE than in commercial enterprises (Huysentruyt, 2014; Bernardino, Freitas Santos and Cadima Ribeiro, 2018; Aldawood, 2020). In a Scottish context, we know that women lead 61% of SEs, and 64% of the SE workforce are women. In contrast, Women's Enterprise Scotland reported in August of 2025 that commercial women-owned businesses make up 20% of the business base in Scotland and that while 54% of all start-ups were women-led, the post-start-up pipeline has a 61% attrition rate (Women's Enterprise in Scotland, 2025). The high attrition rate suggests that a lack of talent does not limit women's entrepreneurial potential; rather, systemic conditions undermine

their ability to sustain and grow their ventures within the mainstream start-up pipeline. Clearly, there is a highly disproportionate representation of women entrepreneurs in SE compared to commercial enterprises (61% of SEs are women-led, versus 20% of businesses that are women-owned). On a larger scale, SEs engage in enterprise to help reshape economic, civic, and environmental systems. In fact, the Scottish Government recognised the importance of SE in driving systemic change when it transferred SE support from the Third Sector Division to the Wellbeing Economy Division in August 2023 (Scottish Government, 2024b). Table Two - *Summary of Key Themes in Women's Social Entrepreneurship Literature* provides a summary of traits, motivations and structural contexts outlined above.

Table Two - Summary of Key Themes in Women's Social Entrepreneurship Literature

Theme	**Description**	**Key Findings & Citations**
Care-based, Ethical & Purpose-driven Orientation (Feminist Economic Framing)	Value-driven leadership rooted in care, responsibility and social purpose	Women social entrepreneurs prioritise social and environmental aims over profit, framing finance as a means to serve people and the planet. Feminist economic theory frames this as moral agency grounded in care and life-sustaining priorities rather than individual advancement (Pérez Orozco, 2014; Perrons, 2015; Humbert and Roomi, 2018; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020).
Community-embedded & Locally Grounded Practice	Relational, place-based, and community-oriented models of organising	Women-led SEs typically operate at local or community scales, emphasise collaboration, governance participation, and rely on bricolage and social capital, particularly in rural contexts (Levie and Hart, 2011; Lyon and Humbert, 2012; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016; Lewis and Henry, 2019; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020).
Hybrid & Non-linear Motivational Pathways	Overlapping push and pull motivations shaped by values and experience	Women's motivations for engaging in SE are complex and non-linear, blending necessity, moral compulsion, and lived experience rather than singular push or pull drivers (Gabarret, Vedel and Decaillon, 2017; Humphris, 2017; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020; Steiner, Calò and Shucksmith, 2023).
Gendered Structural & Institutional Constraints	Structural conditions shaping women's	Caregiving responsibilities, disrupted career progression, risk perceptions,

	pathways into SE	socio-cultural norms, and structural barriers shape women's entry into SE (Levie and Hart, 2011; Benavides-Espinosa and Mohedano-Suanes, 2012; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020).
Scale, Resources & Access to Finance	Resource constraints affecting growth and sustainability	Women-led SEs tend to operate at smaller scales, with lower revenue and fewer employees, and face persistent challenges accessing external financing due to bias, risk assessment practices, and weaker investor networks (Humbert, 2012; Huysentruyt, 2014; Bernardino, Freitas Santos and Cadima Ribeiro, 2018; OECD/GWEP, 2025).
SE as an Enabling & Systemic Space for Women	Representation, retention, and system-level impact	SE demonstrates a smaller gender gap and higher retention of women than commercial entrepreneurship and plays an increasing role in addressing institutional gaps and contributing to systemic social and economic change (Huysentruyt, 2014; Aldawood, 2020; Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Scottish Government, 2024b).

Feminine-informed leadership in SE is not incidental. When care and collective accountability are embedded in core economic infrastructure rather than treated as externalities, they become strategic resources that draw on community knowledge, lived experience, and relational networks to generate meaningful social impact (Tronto, 1993; Doherty, Haugh and Lyon, 2014). It challenges the assumption of infinite growth championing economic systems grounded in interdependence, reciprocity and ecological care (Pérez Orozco, 2014).

Women are not simply participating in SE; they are actively shaping its character and direction. While their contributions have often been framed as intuitive or "natural", which they clearly are, they are also deliberate and skilled economic strategies (Pérez Orozco, 2022). Understanding these forms of leadership is therefore critical not only for advancing gender equality, especially since SE has been identified as a platform for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment (Huysentruyt, 2014; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020), but for informing broader debates about the future direction of enterprise, societal and ecological survival itself. The WiSE research reinforces this argument, showing how women-led SEs prioritise wellbeing

over extraction, resilience over growth-for-growth's sake, and collective agency over individual heroism.

Social Enterprise in Scotland

With a flourishing SE landscape in Scotland, it is essential to pause and take note of various factors that impact SE development, particularly women-led SE. This section examines current policy through a gendered lens, provides an understanding of recent changes to intermediary support organisations from the perspective of research participants, and offers a snapshot of the Scottish women-led SEs participating in the research.

Social Enterprise & a Fairer Scotland: A Look at Policy

While Scotland is considered a global leader in SE, it also positions itself as a global leader in women's equality through a range of policy initiatives aimed at building a 'Fairer Scotland'. A fairer Scotland envisions lower levels of poverty and inequality, genuine equitable access to opportunity, improved life chances, and support for those in need (Scottish Government, 2016a). Examining how these ambitions intersect with the lived realities of women-led SE provides a pivotal context for understanding both progress and persistent gaps. From an entrepreneurial perspective, the Scottish government aims to address structural barriers that reduce women's full participation in business, such as limited access to mentoring, resources, networking, and skill development (Women's Enterprise Scotland, 2019).

This focus on gender is reflected in policy initiatives such as the Fairer Scotland Action Plan in 2016, the establishment of a National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, and the launch of Women in Enterprise in 2017. Alongside these policy initiatives, the Scottish Government introduced several targeted programmes intended to support women's participation in enterprise. These include the Women in Business Growth Programme, launched in 2020 to help women grow their businesses, and ongoing support for organisations such as Investing

Women, Business Women Scotland, and Women's Enterprise Scotland. In December 2025, the government published an Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy (EHMS), which sets out a practical framework for embedding equality and human rights across policymaking, service delivery, and resource allocation decisions (Scottish Government, 2025a). As such, it offers a clear opportunity to embed gender and human rights considerations more systematically within SE policy and practice. Taken all together, these initiatives signal an intention to move beyond standalone interventions towards a more integrated approach to equality within economic development.

However, while these measures reflect a movement towards an overarching equality framework, their effectiveness depends on their alignment with gender-aware, rights-based investment strategies that recognise and resource women's distinctive economic models, including within SE (Scottish Government, 2025a). The EHMS strategy explicitly frames policy and resource decisions through a human rights-based, intersectional lens that goes beyond stand-alone initiatives and supports integration across policy areas, including strategic investment decisions (Scottish Government, 2025a).

With this in mind, existing SE policy frameworks have yet to explicitly integrate gender considerations into SE policy and, as such, can be considered gender-neutral or gender-blind. According to the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, a Canadian-based organisation that operates both nationally and internationally, a gender-blind approach ignores gender norms, roles, and relations, thereby reinforcing gender-based discrimination, biases, and stereotypes (Centre of Excellence in Women's Health, 2025). Another report authored by Neason (2017) and the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) created a Gender Continuum, a framework that helps map approaches to gender (whether in projects, policy, or academia). Gender-neutral approaches assume equality already exists, while gender-accommodating approaches work around existing norms without changing them (Neason, 2017). Policy and programming must, at the very least, be gender-responsive (with clear actions to reduce inequality) and work towards gender-transformative (with a change in existing power structures) (Neason, 2017). Closer to

home, Angela O'Hagan, the current Chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission and a Professor of Equality and Public Policy at Glasgow Caledonian University, in her article, *Gender budgeting in Scotland: A work in progress* critiques an implicit gender-neutrality in conventional economic policy and aims to advance a gender-aware analysis as essential to policy success (O'Hagan, 2017).

When policy is gender-neutral, it can overlook the realities of 'gendered participation,' a notable oversight given that women lead 61% of these businesses. The integration of gender measures into SE policy is an untapped opportunity, given Scotland's SE leadership at home and abroad. This intersection could strengthen both agendas (gender equality and SE policy), offering the potential for meaningful policy coordination and innovation.

In this context, Scotland stands at a pivotal moment. The infrastructure for gender equality exists, and the success of women-led SEs is already visible in practice. Yet policy frameworks governing the sector have not fully 'caught up'. To remain a global leader in both gender equality and SE, Scotland must recognise the intersection between the two, value these innovative models, and invest accordingly. The most recent equity and human rights strategy, in which O'Hagan (2026) emphasises systemic, collaborative approaches to embedding human rights, provides a foundation for transformative SE policy. Scotland's concurrent shift towards a Wellbeing Economy further expands this policy space, enabling approaches that structurally address inequalities, support care-oriented outcomes, and align with feminist economic objectives.

Scotland's Evolving Intermediary Social Enterprise Landscape

The evolution of Scotland's intermediary landscape is a significant backdrop to understanding the experiences of women social entrepreneurs. Over the past two decades, support bodies have played a central role in shaping the culture, visibility and development of the SE ecosystem. For example, Senscot provided national support and networking for grassroots SE networks (Scottish Government, no date b). Founded on a participatory,

community-based approach, it strengthened peer collaboration and championed models grounded in networking, care, culture, and local empowerment. Social Firms Scotland (SFS) supported employment-focused SEs for people facing barriers to work, and Social Enterprise Scotland (SES) offered sector-wide representation and advocacy (Scottish Government, no date b). As the sector has matured, the Scottish Government and SE support ecosystem leaders sought to streamline and modernise this infrastructure, responding to long-standing calls for clarity, coordination, and reduced duplication. The transition involving these three organisations reflects this broader policy ambition, aiming to create a more coherent national framework. This occurred at a time when sector expectations were rapidly expanding, moving beyond third sector placement towards the delivery of Scotland's Wellbeing Economy.

Senscot, Social Firms Scotland & the SES Transition:

In 2020, Senscot and SFS merged to form Social Enterprise Network Scotland (SENScot), consolidating support for networks and employment-focused SEs. While this merger addressed some fragmentation, the Scottish Government further responded to the still "cluttered landscape" by implementing the *Social Enterprise Action Plan*, which committed to rationalising intermediary functions (Scottish Government, 2021). While all three organisations participated constructively in the process, a final agreement could not be reached, prompting a competitive tender process. SES was selected as the funded intermediary, with some staff transitioning from SENScot into SES roles. This was not a leadership contest or merger involving competing appointments, but a reorganisation intended to streamline sector support and create a coherent national framework.

Yet organisational restructuring does not occur in a vacuum. For many women in this study, the consolidation raised questions about which values and practices would shape the new national framework. This transition is explored not as a dispute between organisations, but as a window into the wider ideological tensions at play in Scotland's SE ecosystem.

Anecdotal feedback from Senscot network members at the time suggested that this shift was interpreted symbolically as a move away from grassroots, relational practice toward a more corporate, centrally-led model of representation. This was not framed as a gender issue, but as a shift in paradigm from a relationship-centred, participatory, place-based focus to a growth-driven, market-aligned, brand-focused one. For women leading locally, the concern was not the organisational change itself but what it appeared to signal: hybrid and community-rooted models might be increasingly sidelined or required to justify themselves against corporate logic such as growth, scale and Gross Value Added (GVA) rather than social and environmental impact and economic multipliers.

Internal Change and Commitment:

It is essential to acknowledge that the intermediary landscape continues to develop. Interviewees and sector partners pointed to sustained internal work within SES that has rebuilt trust, strengthened engagement and included renewed attention to Social Enterprise Networks, such as the WiSE collective. Efforts to widen participation in policy dialogue and representation are combined with a growing emphasis on care, locality, cultural identity, and lived experience within organisational practice. Whilst there are a variety of perspectives on this shift, study participants recognised that the developments are aligning intermediary support more closely with the relational and community-rooted approaches increasingly shaping the sector.

A System Still Negotiating Its Centre of Gravity:

This transition highlights a critical moment of reflection for Scotland's SE sector. Rather than representing a simple organisational change, it points to a deeper process of renegotiation over what is valued, recognised, and resourced. Women participating in this study consistently emphasised that ambition itself is not in question; rather, it is the way ambition is defined. Their leadership prioritises collective flourishing over competitive singular expansion, influence built through trust and belonging rather than dominance, and impact measured through transformed lives as well as financial metrics and linear growth.

At the same time, participants were clear that this process is ongoing rather than complete. As women-led and community-rooted enterprises continue to demonstrate collective, relational and care-based approaches to addressing social and ecological challenges, interviewees suggested that the supporting infrastructure will need to continue adapting in response. From this perspective, the transition involving Senscot, SFS, and SES is best understood as one moment within a longer process of sectoral realignment, the outcomes of which will shape how SE contributes to Scotland's broader Wellbeing Economy in the years ahead.

Snapshot of Participating SEs in the Study

To further contextualise the research, this section provides a snapshot of the participating women-led SEs. Across the study, participants described a diverse range of generative organisational forms that illustrate how feminine-informed leadership is shaping practice. Rather than adopting a single model, these SEs reflect diverse, bespoke responses to their own social, cultural, and environmental contexts. What follows is a brief overview of the women-led SEs involved in the study.

First, a handful of these organisations offer services to neurodivergent individuals, and many were led by women with personal experience of neurodivergence. In these settings, support structures were deliberately designed around care, safe space, rest, and recovery, with relational accountability embedded in everyday operational practice. Second, some interviewees referred to a focus on creativity and culture firmly rooted in place. Leaders in these organisations drew on storytelling, craft, gardening, and food growing as practical tools for community cohesion and regeneration, where meaning-making and economic activity are inseparable. Third, community wellbeing and employability organisations formed another significant category. These SEs frequently supported individuals facing complex barriers, often in contexts where statutory services had withdrawn. Participants described how this required leaders to prioritise belonging, trust-building, and dignity as foundational principles, and to

develop new forms of support infrastructure in response to local need. Fourth, women-led rural SEs similarly focused on community wealth-building, local skill-sharing, and the circular use of resources. These SEs prioritised environmental stewardship of built and natural environments, as well as long-term resilience. Growth was measured in the number of new initiatives rather than expansionist economics. Fifth, women with disabilities and/or long-term conditions also intentionally redesigned workplaces to reflect variable energy levels, sensory needs, and alternative communication styles, with accessibility framed as the driver of organisational innovation. Finally, women of colour were also described as challenging assumptions about leadership, advancing economic models that recognise diversity, cultural knowledge and experience as forms of value rather than marginal attributes.

Each of these SEs embodies principles of shared leadership, local accountability, care as infrastructure, sustainability as survival, and community ownership of impact. As one participant expressed, "*We aren't trying to build an empire, we are planting a forest*." These examples suggest that SEs informed by feminine models of leadership are not marginal or experimental but are functioning in practice across multiple contexts. It points toward a reconfiguration of economic value that is grounded in collective wellbeing and ecological sustainability, rather than dominance or accumulation.

Overall, SE in Scotland is vibrant, impactful and evolving. We observe this in the latest merger between Senscot, SFS and SES, in the policies and action plans, and in the diverse number of SEs operating on the ground. What is clear is that while SEs are imbued with and implement gender equality measures and feminine economic values, the intermediary support and policy spaces have approached SEs with, at the very least, a gender-neutral lens. There is ample opportunity to catch up by intersecting gender and SE toward a more gender-transformative approach.

Findings

The WiSE collective's research indicates that women-led, feminine leadership-informed SEs are reshaping SE in practice, from grassroots to policy. Participants described organisational models in which care, inclusion, and relational accountability are embedded in both governance structures and in everyday operational practices. These approaches consistently challenge dominant assumptions about growth, productivity, and leadership, demonstrating that alternative SE models are not merely theoretical but already operating within the sector, often beneath the radar and in ongoing tension with the systems designed to support them. The paper presents eleven key findings.

1. Social Enterprise is Often Discovered Late, and By Accident

"I didn't know what a social enterprise was. But I knew we needed something that belonged to the community. "
- Research participant

A striking insight from the interviews is that few of the women began their journeys with any awareness of SE as a concept or business model, and many encountered it only after their businesses were well underway. For example, two participants share:

"I had done a business course, and it didn't mention social enterprise at all."

"We still accidentally find out about social enterprise. I had no idea it was a thing—had to do it all myself."

Most of the participants created businesses based on instinct, empathy, and deep local knowledge by creatively responding to place-based needs and generating social value. They were simply doing what needed to be done. As one research participant shared, "*We were already doing the work, we just didn't have the words for it."* In this sense, SE was not a destination or a chosen business model; instead, it was a recognition that what they were already doing was SE.

2. Discovering Social Enterprise Wasn't Made for Them

Once participants "discovered" SE, however, they frequently experienced a sense of disconnect or misalignment with the support structures they encountered. Participants spoke about the disorientation of entering a sector whose language, support and governance expectations did not reflect their values or ways of working. Although their activities clearly aligned with SE's stated aims, such as community wealth building, trading for purpose, and reinvesting surplus, the surrounding systems were frequently alienating. Funding criteria, governance templates, and business support programmes were described as outdated business models that clash with relational, care-centred practice. Participants shared their initial excitement about finding a 'home' for their work. Still, it soon became apparent that the existing systems were advocating outdated business models and were exclusionary (as shared by two participants):

"Once I found out about social enterprise, I thought, ' Great, this will be a home for us. But it didn't feel like one. It felt like another system we had to fight to belong to."

"It was like trying to wear someone else's shoes. Social enterprise spoke a language that didn't match the way we were doing things."

Instead of finding recognition, many felt marginalised. Some participants felt they were seen as 'amateurs' or "soft" and not "investment-ready." Others described being repeatedly overlooked for funding. One recalled the internalised shame of being "too small," "too messy," or "not serious," despite recognising that, "We weren't failing - we were thriving. But we didn't fit their spreadsheets." Another said,

"If we had wanted to grow a big multi national I'm sure we would have succeeded. We never didn't achieve whatever we put our mind to.. but we didn't want to do that and it's irritating to be regarded as failure just because we didn't do something we never set out to do."

In response, rather than change their values to fit the sector support, they remade the models to suit their values. They adapted governance models and designed lived-experience

practices. They embedded local, cultural, and relational approaches into everything they did, whether in service design, budgeting, or recruitment.

3. Motivation is Not Opportunistic but Needs-based

Many participants described the impetus for starting a business as multifaceted, driven by both push and pull factors. On the one hand, they responded to clear gaps in public and/or private provision; on the other hand, they felt a strong personal drive to create solutions that addressed their communities' needs. As one participant explained, "*I had a well-paid job, but realising it didn't align with what people around me actually needed, I left that role to set up something new that responded directly to those unmet needs*." Taken together, the interviews reveal a consistent pattern: these SEs were not founded out of financial ambition or entrepreneurial aspiration. Rather, they began with lived experience, moral urgency (often a crisis or an existential threat), and a deep sense that something essential was missing in their communities.

Participants described being moved to act after witnessing inequality, exclusion, or unmet needs such as poverty, isolation, lack of creative opportunity, barriers to employment, or the absence of safe spaces for marginalised people. Several spoke of reaching a moment where doing nothing was no longer an option. One participant reflected:

> *"I didn't set out to start a business. I just saw what wasn't there for people, and someone had to step in".*

One participant spoke of the impulse to save a cherished heritage building from demolition. Another described their motivation was a response to the anger they felt, "*It came from anger, really... anger that people were being written off... I wanted to create something that said: You matter*." Instead of seeing profit opportunities, they saw gaps in care, dignity, and belonging. One framed their work as a form of social repair, as one explained, "*We were responding to what was broken locally, not trying to build something shiny*." Others spoke of starting informally

by creating running groups, organising activities, and supporting neighbours. It was only afterwards that they realised they needed formal structures and income to sustain the work. As one shared,

“We were already doing it. The organisation came afterwards, because we needed a way to keep it [the work] going."

This echoes a long lineage of women-led community action in Scotland, where cultural, social, and economic initiatives emerge from personal, grassroots motivations. What stands out is that these motivations are consistently centred on:

- social justice and fairness,
- care for specific people and places,
- creating opportunity where none existed,
- restoring dignity and agency, and
- building futures collectively rather than individually.

As one participant nicely summarised, "*I wasn’t trying to grow something for myself. I was trying to change what was possible for others*."

4. Lived Experience Leadership

The women interviewed were responding not only to unmet needs but also to the traumas they had experienced and those faced by others. This has resulted in lived experience leadership that is relational, intuitive, and deeply humane. As one interviewee said:

“If you’ve never experienced trauma, you might think leadership is about telling people what to do. But if you have, you know it’s about listening. It's about making it safe enough for people to try again.”

This translated into practices that challenged traditional organisational norms. Instead of strict boundaries, they created spaces of hospitality and co-regulation. Rather than seeking to manage trauma clinically, they sought to meet it creatively, through the growing and sharing of food, gardening, textiles, rituals, animals, stories, and symbolic acts of care. One participant spoke of how slow, tactile activities such as cleaning, folding, or making tea became healing

rituals rather than just chores. Another described how being able to choose their own mug was interpreted as a profound gesture of respect and autonomy. As shared:

“There are people here who’ve never been allowed to choose their own cup before. That small thing tells them: ‘you belong’.”

Many of the women consciously designed trauma-informed spaces, sometimes with professional support, often through instinct. They refused to pathologise. They didn’t “fix” people. They offered warmth, consistency, and invitation to be creative. As shared by one respondent:

“We have people who don’t speak for weeks. Then one day, they say hello. That’s a win. We celebrate that.”

Participants consistently described leadership in these settings as relational rather than directive and of the ongoing work of holding emotional intensity, absorbing uncertainty, and maintaining calm in highly volatile contexts. This form of leadership involved substantial cultural and emotional labour. Leadership was often about presence and emotional regulation rather than formal authority. They became skilled at recognising triggers, patterns, and signs of distress.

5. The Personal Cost of Care

At the same time, these leaders were clear about the personal cost of carrying this leadership responsibility, describing experiences of exhaustion, overwhelm, and burnout. Leaders spoke of long working hours, multiple overlapping roles, and the guilt of having to neglect their own families to keep organisations afloat. As one shared the weight they felt if they failed:

“To fail would be to fail the whole community and the whole ethos. This initiative is much bigger than us.”

Despite the personal risks, such as loss of income and burnout, many saw no alternative. Their organisations had become lifelines for people with nowhere else to go. As shared by another

participant, *“If we stopped, even for a week, I don’t know where some of our folks would end up.”* The paradox is stark in that these women were creating trauma-informed systems and were providing safety while neglecting their own wellbeing. As three respondents shared:

“I didn’t need medical help, I just needed time-off help.”

“We’ve always just quietly got on and done what needs to be done, even when we’re exhausted.”

“That caring, nurturing work is just taken for granted - that it will ‘just get done’. We’ve been complicit in that, quietly getting on with it even when we’re exhausted and burnt out.”

This is a critical area for future policy attention. If we want to achieve Scotland’s Wellbeing Economy, we must resource and protect the people doing that work, not just applaud their resilience.

6. Exclusion from Conventional Funding/Financing

A recurring theme across the interviews was the tension between values-led work and financial sustainability. The women leading these organisations were not naïve about money. On the contrary, they were acutely aware that money is a vital resource for delivering their missions. As shared by one research participant, *“Money’s not a dirty word. The more money we have, the more we can do.”* Participants also emphasised that ambition and ethics are not mutually exclusive. Their vision was expansive: to create meaningful change, generate employment, regenerate local economies and communities, and support those excluded from the mainstream. But this requires investment, and several participants described how difficult it was to secure funding for work that didn’t fit conventional metrics. The dominant logic of efficiency, scale, and measurable outputs often failed to capture the slow, relational, and transformative nature of their impact. One participant shared that much of her work involved “*sitting with people who are disconnected,”* yet *“there’s no funding for that.”*

In response to these constraints, participants described a range of adaptive approaches to funding and evaluation. These included blending trading income with grant funding and using

storytelling and participatory evaluation to capture qualitative impacts. Several participants spoke about redefining success and developing evaluative frameworks that reflect their own organisational values and lived experience rather than relying solely on externally imposed measures. One interviewee shared setting up daily targets, "*not to chase profit, but to honour participation."*

7. Gatekeeper Economics

Many described being at the mercy of gatekeeping organisations that controlled access to employability or support funding, often receiving referrals for people with high needs without the financial support to accompany them. These women-led SEs usually work with people with complex needs, those furthest from the labour market, or navigating trauma, neurodiversity, mental health challenges, or long-term conditions. As one research participant shared:

"They keep the money and send us the hardest cases. We take them because they matter. But it's not sustainable."

These practices expose a structural inequity in which larger organisations retain the resources, while smaller women-led SEs absorb complexity, risk, and moral responsibility.

"We get referrals for people no one else wants to work with - but without the funding that should come with them. Because they know we won't say no."

Far from rejecting money, these leaders call for a redistribution of resources that recognises the value of their work. Not just to survive but to grow, innovate, and regenerate. To achieve this, they ask for proper investment:

"We can't keep scraping by and calling it 'sustainable'.
We need proper investment so we can build proper systems."

Participants also described the tension of operating within what might be understood as a moral economy of care, where decisions are guided by a sense of responsibility to people and place rather than by funding availability. Many spoke about the difficulty of balancing

compassion with organisational sustainability. Turning people away was described as ethically unacceptable, yet accepting responsibility without adequate resources was recognised as unsustainable in the long term.

8. Redefining and Remaking Growth

Within dominant business discourse, growth is often framed in terms of expansion, organisational scaling, and market replication. Similar assumptions can also be found within parts of the SE sector, where impact is frequently assessed through measures of size, reach, and linear growth. Participants in this research accepted the notion of growth. Rather than pursuing expansionist growth, they described more sustainable, rhizomatic[3] models that prioritise regeneration, the development of new enterprises, and deep, organic growth within place and community. One participant shared that they, "*... want to change existing systems, not replicate them."* These leaders pursue variation over replication, depth over breadth, contribution over control and rhythm over speed. As two research participants stated:

"What we're doing is the drip effect: long-term, consistent, asset-based growth."

"Every time someone says, 'you've changed my life' - that's the impact. That's the growth."

Another finding suggests that growth is situated in practices and processes that unfold over time. By strengthening relationships and local capacity, such approaches contribute to the social infrastructure of place, even when conventional measures do not easily capture this impact. As one participant shared, "*I'm trying to build the world I want to live in through my work",* and another rebranded the term 'Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)' to 'Signs of Success.'

[3] Rhizomatic refers metaphorically to non-hierarchical, interconnected and multiple paths of growth (drawing on the botany of rhizomes that grow underground and spread horizontally, generating new growth from multiple points) (Deleuze, 1987).

9. Governance as Meaning-making

Across the interviews, governance emerged as more than a legal or administrative function. Instead, it was a site of innovation that reflected values and a lived reality. Women described governance as the practice of inclusion, responsibility, and collective accountability, empowering participants and enabling new leaders to emerge. These leaders reinvested governance from the ground up, not only because dominant models didn't fit, but also because many were excluded from those systems in the first place. Several participants described deliberately moving away from professionalised trustee models towards flatter, more participatory governance structures accountable to the communities they serve. As one participant shared:

"I was told I needed a board of experts.
I built a board of people with lived experience instead."

Governance was a key part of how organisations expressed their values in practice, shaping the work undertaken, how decisions were made, by whom, and in whose interests. As one research participant states:

"Because I had no experience of boards, I did it my way, and I firmly believe there's another way of running boards. A more kind and inclusive way that is less hierarchical."

Interviewees also acknowledged that these approaches are often misunderstood in environments that privilege conventional hierarchies, scale, credentials, and risk-averse governance frameworks.

For these leaders, governance is also a healing practice. Some spoke of experiences of trauma, marginalisation, or disempowerment in earlier work environments and of how their organisations became spaces for rewriting those stories. One participant described involving their whole team in rewriting the organisation's foundational documents, not as a formality, but as a process of collective agency. They stated, "*I turned to my [community members] to ask if*

*anyone wanted to join the board. So it was an all-female board from the get-g*o." The practices described by women in this study suggest possible directions for such a shift and invite further reflection on what leadership, accountability, and democratic practice could look like if governance were designed around these principles.

10. Employment with Purpose

In mainstream policy, employability is often framed through the lens of productivity, efficiency, and economic output. Programmes are designed to move people "closer to the labour market," and "job readiness." The women in this study approached employability not as a transaction but as a transformation, rooted in dignity, participation, creativity, contribution, and care. As one interviewee conveyed:

"Among the most important things for us is that people feel useful - that their skills are valued, they're part of something and that they matter."

The leaders in this study built pathways for contribution that offer flexible volunteering, creative and generative work placements, peer mentoring, creative learning, and supportive environments where people can develop their confidence and self-esteem without fear of failure. As one research participant stated:

"We've got a woman in her sixties who started baking again with us. She says she feels useful for the first time in years."

Employability within these women-led organisations is redefined from matching individuals to vacancies or achieving short-term employment pathways to asking who that person is as a contribution and creating learning spaces that support dignity, creativity, contribution, and social connection. Employability is understood not as cogs in a machine but as the capacity to participate meaningfully. It raised different evaluative questions, such as what forms of contribution are valued, how people are rebuilding confidence and purpose, and how collective activity can create conditions for both belonging and work. The ultimate aim was not

just to move people into jobs, but to restore their place in the social fabric. One research participant stated:

> *"Everyone wants to be part of something. That's what we do - we make spaces where people can find their way back in."*

This, too, is growth and is a part of Scotland's Wellbeing Economy: not in the capitalist or neo-liberal sense, but in the sense of growing lives, nurturing purpose, and increasing wellbeing.

11. Cultural Planning as a Common Thread

While a few of our participants identified themselves as artists, many described ways of working that are artistic and cultural. Embracing craft, community gardening, or employing socially engaged artists, these women leaders were crafting environments, designing rituals, and reimagining social systems through creative, collaborative, place-based methods. One participant reflected:

> *"We want to create spaces and bring people together to challenge things. In projects such as the … garden, this took the form of 'making a new space for the community - a commons for the community"*

This kind of leadership is not tied to a five-year strategic plan; instead, it embraces cultural planning to map community assets, celebrate history and heritage, tell stories, and animate participation in the shared life of a place. As one research participant stated, "*We are creating a new movement and a new economy for the island in real time."*

Leadership in these terms is more about curating and meaning-making than managing systems. These women are bricoleurs in action, weaving together fragments of funding, support, creativity, and care to shape new ecosystems of belonging. One interviewee repurposed abandoned land to host community growing. Another organisation offered slow-paced and trauma-informed tasks such as baking and working with animals. The same cultural sensitivity applies to rituals of welcome, signage, language, and job roles, even down to

the arrangement of chairs. These were not aesthetic afterthoughts; they were structural choices, reflecting a deep commitment to relational infrastructure. This creative, cultural orientation also extended to strategy and governance. One participant described using storytelling methods to frame organisational planning:

"We use metaphor a lot - gardening, journeying, weaving.
It helps us think beyond targets."

These artistic approaches are not decorative; they are foundational. They shaped how these leaders design workplaces, include people, measure change, and imagine futures.

Discussion

Across these findings, a coherent pattern emerges in which women are not simply seeking entry into existing systems but are remaking enterprise and governance so that transformation becomes possible. They are building relational infrastructures of trust, contribution, belonging, and place stewardship, often in contexts where formal institutions have withdrawn or where support systems reward the wrong indicators. The task for Scotland is therefore not to "teach women social entrepreneurs to scale," but to align investment, evaluation, commissioning, and intermediary support with the models already working, and to ensure that risk, responsibility, and resources are shared fairly across the ecosystem. The following discussion synthesises the study's findings and draws out their implications for gender equity, intersectionality, and systemic change.

1. Social Enterprise Straddles Existing and Alternative Systems

Although SEs operate within markets, the values that underpin them are rooted in much older traditions of economic practice grounded in reciprocity, care, cooperation, and stewardship (Gibson-Graham, 2013; Polanyi, 2024). From this perspective, SE is not simply an alternative to a dominant economic model, but a continuation, and reassertion, of forms of economic

organisation that sustained communities long before the rise of extractive, growth-driven capitalism. What distinguishes the SEs, at least in our study, is not a rejection of enterprise itself but an assertion that profit is a resource for ‘doing the good stuff.

A key question raised by critics of SE is whether these enterprises challenge or inadvertently reinforce existing structures. Both Clark Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan (2016) and Lewis and Henry (2019) caution that without a critical feminist lens, SE may inadvertently reproduce existing gendered and structural inequalities. At a practical level, the answer is nuanced. On the one hand, women-led SEs radically expand who can lead, what leadership looks like, and how economies can operate. In doing so, they demonstrate participatory, ethical, and care-based forms of value creation. On the other hand, funding and policy systems continue to be designed around masculine-coded assumptions of scale and competition, and do not critically assess structural barriers.

These systems tend to prioritise meeting targets over fostering relational, long-term impact, directing resources to outdated measures like turnover and client numbers rather than the deeper value generated through sustained, community-rooted engagement, reinforcing male-centred norms in how success and performance are measured in enterprise and funding systems (Henry, Foss and Ahl, 2016; Lewis and Henry, 2019). This raises important questions about how responsibility and support resources are allocated. Participants were clear that their work is neither charitable nor informal; it is skilled, professional, and requires consistent investment to deliver ethical, effective, and viable outcomes. If the aim is to build community wealth and a resilient, generative, place-and-purpose-based, wellbeing economy, then funding mechanisms must be adapted to reflect grassroots realities.

When funding frameworks fail to recognise relational labour and leadership as legitimate work, these women-led SEs continue to be measured against untenable standards that they have already rejected. In doing so, the current systems continue to ignore and devalue their strengths, reinforcing the misconception that feminine-informed leadership is weak or commercially naive. Seen from this perspective, the structural mismatch between funding

criteria and the forms of value women-led SEs generate perpetuates inequality, rather than challenging it.

This interpretation, however, overlooks the obvious benefits of engaging the capitalist system while remaining embedded with values of wellbeing. This position is one of enormous strength, offering power and potential for community wealth-building as SE introduces care-based economics into the capitalist model. It transforms capitalism from the inside out.

Despite the transformational qualities inherent in feminine models of leadership, business, and enterprise, these approaches still operate within the profit-extraction paradigm. SE extends these qualities, binding profits to community collectivism, mutual benefit, and environmental stewardship rather than to shareholders and individual gain. Operating within the existing system does not, by itself, constitute a social or political revolution; meaningful transformation requires systemic change that goes beyond individual innovation. It calls for the recognition that care, collaboration, and inclusion are not “soft skills,” but the very architecture of a sustainable economy. In this sense, SEs serve as practical prototypes of Scotland’s Wellbeing Economy.

2. Women-led Social Enterprises are Already Building a New Economy

The WiSE findings point to an emerging reorientation in economic and organisational practice, in which women-led SEs are developing AEBMs and democratic life rooted in care, collaboration, culture, and relational intelligence, rather than extraction, competition, or scale. They are bricoleurs (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Kwong, Tasavori and Wun-mei Cheung, 2017), adapting and creating with what is available, designing governance around real human lives rather than abstract business norms. In doing so, they design governance and organisational structures around lived experience and human capacity, rather than abstract business norms. Again, this aligns with Williams’ (1958) conception of culture as “a whole way of life” and Patrick

Geddes' relationship between 'folk–work–place' (Meller, 1993) or, more recently, Shenaz Hossein (2018), who focuses on grassroots solidarity economics and is more explicitly feminist. Decades of feminist and social economy scholarship and practice-based writing have demonstrated the 'how to' of community empowerment, sustainability and the challenge of centralised, top-down systems (Amin, Cameron and Hudson, 2002; Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2013). These women-led SEs demonstrate this in practice, not only by delivering services but also by shaping cultures of belonging, meaning, and participation. They design organisations that hold emotional reality, memory, trauma, creativity, and place within economic production.

The implications of this research extend beyond Scotland's SE ecosystem. The models of leadership and business speak to the building of economic models for a post-capitalist future of gender equity and global development. If women's leadership and feminine economic values continue to be marginalised or instrumentalised, the potential for systemic change will remain unrealised. But if they are recognised and resourced, they could form the foundation of a new social contract, one grounded in relational accountability, ecological responsibility, and distributive justice.

Feminist economists argue that economies reflect what societies choose to value; if care, cooperation, and human wellbeing are prioritised, economic systems must be intentionally designed to support them (Waring, 1988; Power, 2004; Folbre, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Elson, 2017; Moser, 2024). The WiSE participants are already engaging in this work. Their leadership extends beyond organisational change to a reconfiguration of how value is understood and enacted locally (Folbre, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2013; Raworth, 2017), shifting emphasis from competitive growth toward collective thriving. So growth, governance, and economic models are redefined and reinvented in more carefully defined terms. Based on the research findings and as a considered interpretation, Table Three - *Redefining Economic Growth* presents descriptors that shift from a masculine perspective to a feminine-informed lens.

Table Three: Redefining Economic Growth

Feminine Economic Growth Model	Masculine Economic Growth Model
Variation Distributed seeding Resilience Adaptation Relational fertility Deep, contextual change	Replication Centralised-scaling Efficiency Expansionism Market dominance KPI-driven impact

3. Feminine Leadership is Systemic Change

The women in this research do not replicate existing power structures; instead, they reconfigure them through process-oriented collaboration rather than product-driven hierarchy. Leadership is enacted through relational practices, including listening, inquiry, and shared responsibility, transforming organisations into learning communities. These approaches reflect an ethic of care in which attentiveness, responsiveness, and mutual responsibility are embedded in everyday organisational life (Wheatley, 2009; Tronto, 2013). By operationalising these principles through governance structures and workplace cultures, participants demonstrate leadership models that prioritise community development, personal growth, and collective flourishing alongside organisational sustainability.

These leaders demonstrate that cultural transformation and economic sustainability are interdependent rather than competing goals, and they are reshaping the SE ecosystem itself to function as learning systems rather than command structures. Decision-making is distributed, governance is participatory, and authority is earned through trust and contribution rather than status. This is not simply values-based leadership; it is a different way of organising economic life that celebrates complexity, vulnerability, and mutual dependence as productive rather than problematic. Crucially, this approach also produces resilience. By investing in relationships, trust, and psychological safety, these SEs create organisations capable of absorbing uncertainty, sustaining people through crises, and adapting over time, thereby leading systemic change.

4. Intersectionality as a Source of Economic Strength

Although intersectionality was not the primary analytical lens of this study, it remains an important frame for understanding how multiple forms of marginalisation shape leadership practices and organisational approaches. The findings suggest that intersectionality functions not only as a demographic descriptor but also as a mode of economic knowing. Leaders from racialised, minoritised, disabled, neurodivergent, and those working in rural or disadvantaged contexts draw on lived experiences of exclusion to design enterprises that operate differently (Collins, 2009; Carter *et al.*, 2015). For many women from racialised or minoritised communities in particular, entrepreneurship is not solely about income but about safety, dignity, and visibility within economies that routinely marginalise them (Carter *et al.*, 2015; Hossein, 2018). While some are drawn towards commercial enterprise, which often emphasises growth and profit, engagement with SE is often grounded in community need and lived experience (Gabarret, Vedel and Decaillon, 2017; Rosca, Agarwal and Brem, 2020). These lived experiences and community knowledge enable leaders to identify and address gaps and to create meaningful social impact through relational, place-based growth (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006).

From this perspective, the leadership and organisational practices observed can be understood as feminine-informed leadership. As used in the paper, “feminine” does not denote biological sex or gender identity, or women’s leadership; rather, it describes an orientation grounded in feminist political economy and care ethics foregrounding care as a collective social and economic practice, relational interdependence, collaborative coordination, attentiveness to context, and resistance to extractive growth logics (Gibson-Graham, 2013; Tronto, 2013; Armstrong, 2024; Harcourt, 2026). These practices are further shaped by the intersections of lived experiences of gender, race, disability, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989, 2017), where leadership is frequently informed by structural marginalisation and community accountability (hooks, 2000). In the context of SE, these practices emerge strongly from leaders’ lived experience at the margins and are evident across diverse contexts, signalling an alternative logic of organising that foregrounds interdependence, place, and social reproduction as central

to value creation (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006). In this sense, intersectional positionality and feminine-informed practice are intertwined, where marginalisation shapes the lens through which leaders design relational, regenerative enterprises. In contrast, feminine-informed principles provide a conceptual frame for understanding how these practices challenge dominant economic norms.

5. Uneven Distribution of Risk and Labour

Despite their effectiveness, participants in our study repeatedly shared that women-led SEs are routinely undervalued because the systems that fund and regulate SEs are still built on masculine-coded assumptions about scale, turnover, efficiency, speed, and individual performance. Relational labour, trauma-informed practice, care, and cultural work are treated as “soft” or non-economic, even though they are demonstrably sustainable and generate profound social and economic value. As a result, women-led SEs are often regarded as “not investment-ready” and are asked to carry the most complex human needs while being denied the resources required to do so sustainably.

This produces a familiar feminist political economy pattern in which care is relied upon but not resourced, a point highlighted by Fraser (2020) and further evidenced in recent studies (Moser, 2024; Michael, 2025; Rodríguez Pérez, 2026). The sector benefits from the emotional, relational, and ethical labour of women-led SEs, yet fails to recognise or fund it structurally. These SEs are not anti-economic. Rather, they operate with a broader understanding of what the economy is and what it is for. They generate income, create jobs, influence local planning, build infrastructure, and regenerate local economies, while simultaneously recognising care, caregiving, relational labour, and ecological stewardship as essential economic activities.

6. Care is Resilience

Across all interviews, care emerges as both a guiding ethic and an organising principle. It redefines resilience not as stoicism or the capacity for overwork, but as the ability to sustain

relationships and wellbeing over time. This finding could have profound implications for funders and policymakers by challenging the myth of “efficiency” that dominates commercial enterprise and capitalist economic discourse. An emphasis on care reveals that the constant pressure for growth and reporting undermines the very resilience it seeks to inculcate. When care becomes central rather than peripheral, systems can sustain complexity and difference.

Drawing particularly on Gibson's work, this research adopts a “diverse economies” perspective that challenges narrow, market-centric definitions of economic value (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, 2013). Rather than treating capitalism as the totality of economic life, this framework recognises care, social reproduction, community exchange, and collective stewardship as foundational economic practices. Within this lens, feminine-informed leadership is understood not as gendered identity but as a political-economic orientation grounded in relationality, interdependence, and place-based wellbeing. These practices are evident across women-led, LGBTQ+, disability-led, and racialised SE contexts, suggesting that what is emerging is not a gendered phenomenon per se, but a shared alternative economic logic that actively resists extractive growth paradigms.

By designing *with* human reality instead of against it, feminine-informed leadership offers a blueprint for post-growth economies with care at their core. Those crucial aspects of life, care and caring must remain both visible and resourced.

7. Networking at its Highest Level

Networking operates across three interconnected levels. At the most basic level, transactional networking focuses on exchanges of information, referrals, or access to resources, as well as short-term interactions that support operational needs (Bridgstock, 2017). The second level is strategic networking, which is oriented toward partnership-building, influencing, and securing the legitimacy often necessary to navigate competitive funding landscapes and institutional gatekeepers (Hite and Hesterly, 2001). Beyond these, feminist scholars highlight a third and deeper layer, one of relational networking, grounded in trust, care and shared purpose

(Ibarra, Kilduff and Tsai, 2005; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). Relational networks act as systems of belonging and emotional support, enabling risk-sharing, collective learning and resilience, particularly for women leaders facing intersecting forms of exclusion. This advanced level of networking redefines the concept itself. It moves beyond instrumental exchange to generate mutual empowerment, reflecting the ethic of interdependence central to feminine economic values. At this level, networking serves as a key intermediary support structure, fostering psychological safety and strengthening peer systems and resource interdependence.

These emergent networks, designed and led by their members, constitute an alternative social and economic infrastructure, an economy of belonging. At the same time, a striking paradox emerges: if so many women experience exclusion, then who exactly is included in the current system? This points to a deeper issue where the dominant frameworks are not just “forgetting women”; they are structurally failing the majority of socially driven leaders. For many women, particularly BME, disabled, or queer leaders, conventional spaces felt unsafe, competitive and performative. In response, they built networks of care.

Participants developing new networks designed governance systems that mirror their values: reflective rather than procedural, relational rather than bureaucratic, and trauma-informed rather than compliance-driven. These new networks, providing protection, learning and recognition (especially for leaders facing sexism, racism, ableism or neuro-exclusion) are inclusive and reveal that striking paradox. The system is structurally failing the majority of socially driven leaders. Belonging cannot be left to chance; it must be foundational to the infrastructure.

8. From the Margins to the Model: Implications for Scotland’s Wellbeing Economy

Scotland’s ambition for a Wellbeing Economy can learn from an economy rooted in care, reciprocity and creativity, ingredients already present in the economic life practised by women-led SEs. Those qualities are visible within our study, where “local” is not equated with

smallness; it is relational, adaptive, and rooted in cultural knowledge. Local is where transformation becomes tangible and trusted. These SEs demonstrate that care, cultural ecology, and community should not be treated as costs but forms of productive infrastructure; as feminist economists have long argued, economic systems reflect and reproduce what they choose to value (Waring, 1988; McKay and Bjørnholt, 2014). To realise this transformation, focusing on wellbeing, sustainability, and social connection rather than GDP alone, the systems and organisations that deliver it must be resourced accordingly. What this research reveals is not a sector in need of fixing, but the prototype of the future economy already in motion. Women-led SEs are not waiting for permission to build; they are already doing so. The only questions, therefore, are about becoming more rooted, more relational, and more capable of sustaining collective wellbeing. The task now is for policy, funding, and intermediary systems to catch up.

Recommendations

To realise the full potential of feminine-informed economic models, Scotland's SE ecosystem must actively resource and embed them. This means redesigning funding frameworks to value depth over scale, investing in preventive work, and recognising care, participation, and lived experience as essential elements of a thriving economy. Support bodies should prioritise collective and facilitated leadership, peer learning, and place-based cultural planning, allowing rhizomatic growth patterns to flourish rather than imposing KPI-driven evaluation measures and linear growth models (Deleuze, 1987). Policy needs to move beyond gender-blindness or a gender-neutral position and integrate intersectional analysis into its policies, metrics, and accountability frameworks, as proposed by O'Hagan (2026). Only by aligning investment, governance, and evaluation with the creative, generative expertise already visible in women-led SEs can Scotland position itself as a global leader in the transition towards more equitable, sustainable, and life-supporting economic systems.

To fully unlock the potential of women-led SE and address the systemic constraints identified in this research, Scotland's SE investment and support structures must evolve across funding, policy, intermediary infrastructure, and leadership development. The recommendations are based on the research findings and are presented for policy, research, and practical changes.

Recommendations for Policymakers

In the Scottish context, feminist economics aligns with government policies around the Wellbeing Economy, a Fairer Scotland, and preventative approaches to public health service delivery. When applied to SE, it's easy to see why women-led SEs prioritising depth over scale are now recognised as essential for long-term sustainability, particularly in the face of the climate crisis and widening inequality. Policymakers shape the operating conditions of the SE ecosystem and can reinforce outdated models of growth and development or enable the regenerative practices that women are pioneering. The following recommendations outline the policy shifts suggested to align national frameworks with the potential of feminine-informed SE.

1. Expand and Diversify Funding Streams for Women-Led SEs

For women-led SEs to flourish, funding mechanisms must reflect how these organisations actually work relationally, adaptively, and with deep community roots, rather than forcing them into models designed for linear, commercial growth. Recommendations include:

- ➢ Prioritising early-stage support from the Social Entrepreneurs Fund for women-led and collective SEs,
- ➢ Creating micro-finance mechanisms for SEs that do not fit 'traditional' business criteria,
- ➢ Developing targeted funding schemes for women-led SEs, including seed funding, bridging finance, and resource continuity,
- ➢ Redesigning investment criteria to recognise relational impact, community values, and cultural work, not just financial growth or scale, and
- ➢ Introducing patient capital, low/no-interest social investment mechanisms that reflect the realities and pace of feminine models of growth and resilience.

2. Apply a Gendered and Intersectional Lens to All SE Policy

SE is currently at risk of reinforcing inequalities within the very sector intended to challenge them. SE policy must therefore be explicitly designed within a gendered and intersectional frame, moving towards gender-responsive and gender-transformative analysis, acknowledging that overlapping forms of marginalisation limit access, opportunities, and profiles. These include:

- ➢ Moving beyond gender-blind/neutral policy frameworks and conducting mandatory gendered, racialised, disability-aware impact assessments for all SE initiatives,
- ➢ Ensuring new strategies explicitly address structural inequalities with support, visibility, and investment, and
- ➢ Maintaining policy coherence across SE strategy, gender equality strategy, health and social care strategies, regeneration and planning strategies, Wellbeing Economy policy, and climate justice work, and positioning women-led SEs as a source of learning as well as a cross-cutting priority.

3. Create Policy Space for Emerging Economic Forms

Scotland's Wellbeing Economy depends on recognising and resourcing the diverse economic forms already flourishing beneath the radar, which do not resemble corporate enterprise but deliver profound social, cultural, and environmental impact. Recommendations include:

- ➢ Resourcing alternative economic entities that don't fit corporate, capitalist criteria, and tripling the number of such entities by 2034, as outlined in the report: Developing Scotland's Economy: Increasing The Role Of Inclusive And Democratic Business Models (Scottish Government, 2024a)
- ➢ Ensuring the lived experience and expertise of women leaders are in the room when resource allocation and policy decisions are determined,
- ➢ Establishing new legal or policy categories (as with community interest companies in earlier decades) to legitimise and support these evolving forms, and
- ➢ Promoting and supporting these models as essential economic infrastructure for Community Wealth Building within a Wellbeing Economy.

4. Recognise and Resource Care as Innovation

Care must be repositioned as the innovative test bed of economic value. This will require policies that treat preventative and wellbeing-focused work as central contributions rather than peripheral costs. Therefore, recommendations include:

- ➢ Recognising the abandonment of commitment to a National Care Service cannot imply abandonment of care as a priority that must be reimagined within a Wellbeing Economy framework,
- ➢ Explicitly integrating SE into national strategies for care, prevention, and community wellbeing,
- ➢ Providing funding for preventative, relational work SEs are already delivering, and
- ➢ Adopting care measurements like reduced isolation, increased confidence, a sense of community belonging, etc., as powerful indicators of public and economic value. The *Commons Health Assets Protocol* shows that these care measures can be assessed using validated wellbeing tools and qualitative methods to understand lived experiences (Baker *et al.*, 2023).

5. Strengthen Infrastructure for Equity, Representation, and Redistribution

Achieving genuine sector-wide equity demands not only representation but the redistribution of power, resources, and decision-making authority to those closest to communities and lived experience. Recommendations include:

- ➢ Requiring intermediaries to collect and publish equity data across gender, sexuality, race, disability, class and geography,
- ➢ Ensuring representation is matched by redistribution of resources, influence, and decision-making, and
- ➢ Encouraging intermediaries to adopt participatory governance that aligns with models emerging within the sector.

Recommendations for Intermediaries / Support Institutions

Intermediary organisations sit at the interface between policy and practice, and their structures, cultures and priorities profoundly shape which models of enterprise are supported, legitimised, and enabled to thrive. The following recommendations outline how support bodies can evolve to reflect and reinforce relational, care-centred leadership across the sector.

1. Provide Sensitive Business Support, Mentoring, and Training

Intermediary support bodies must move beyond recommending generic business development models and provide gender-sensitive, context-aware support and governance advice that responds to the realities of women's entrepreneurial aspirations. Recommendations include:

- ➢ Treating and implementing SE literacy as core business infrastructure (not optional outreach),
- ➢ Developing gender-aware support programmes that address the specific barriers women face (e.g., caregiving roles, access to networks, discrimination, confidence gaps shaped by experience),
- ➢ Leveraging existing entities such as Women's Enterprise Scotland, the WiSE Collective, SENs, and local women's hubs to deliver high-quality mentoring and peer-learning, and
- ➢ Ensuring that business support includes training in relational governance, collective leadership, community wealth-building, trauma-informed practice, and care-led innovation.

2. Co-Design Support Systems WITH Women Social Entrepreneurs

Sustainable support systems must be co-designed with the women who rely on them, shifting from top-down provision to participatory, responsive, and power-sharing models of programme development. Consider:

- ➢ Moving beyond traditional 'consultation' models to ensure that women leaders participate as co-creators at every stage of programme and policy design,
- ➢ Rejecting expectations that women adapt to unsuitable systems and designing support that is fit for purpose,
- ➢ Introducing mechanisms for iterative feedback, accountability, and shared decision-making power with government and intermediaries, and
- ➢ Ensuring women reclaim agency that discredits passive adaptation and delivers a cultural shift that moves expectations on from women being "grateful recipients" of support to asserting what is needed and saying why.

3. Integrate Feminine Leadership Models

Leadership training must evolve to encourage relational, collaborative listening and reflective practices. These practices already define effective SE leadership across Scotland, but they need to be mainstreamed and celebrated. To achieve this, we recommend that:

- ➢ Principles of collaboration, reflexivity, relational accountability, care, and cultural planning must be embedded into leadership programmes,
- ➢ Developmental pathways for leaders whose expertise comes from lived experience must be supported, and
- ➢ Training to be deployed to all support intermediaries, government officials, policymakers and funders.

4. Prioritise the Third (highest) Level of Networking: Relational Networks

Since women's leadership thrives within networks grounded in trust, reciprocity, and emotional safety, intermediaries must prioritise relational networking as core infrastructure, rather than an optional add-on. Therefore, we recommend:

- ➢ Investing in cultivating relational, trust-based networks that enable women to share learning, support one another, and innovate collectively,
- ➢ Recognising three levels of networking, 1) transactional (information exchange), 2) strategic (collaboration for joint goals), and 3) relational (deep trust, shared purpose, emotional and practical support),
- ➢ Prioritising Level 3 networks, as women are natural leaders in developing these, and they form the backbone of a regenerative ecosystem, and
- ➢ Reprioritising financial priorities that currently favour capitalist growth SE models in favour of feminine-informed leadership models.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has highlighted the need for further research grounded in lived experience and longitudinal to track change over time. These findings provide a snapshot of women-led SE in Scotland and highlight essential gaps in the current evidence base. Several areas are recommended for further research.

1. Longitudinal research that follows women social entrepreneurs through different stages of development, and comparative work that explores how feminine-informed leadership models take shape in various regional and cultural contexts.
2. Comparative research between women-led commercial entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. At present, there is very little research on the distinction between the two types of entrepreneurship, including the push-and-pull factors.
3. A more in-depth feminist, gendered critique of gender and SE, using, for example, the Gender Integration Continuum to fully assess how policy and practice can be more gender-responsive and gender-transformative.

4. Interlocal studies that measure Scotland's SE practice and impact against those of other European countries and globally (other Global North leaders such as Australia and Canada, and the Global South, Africa, and India have been suggested). With Scotland as a global player and valued contributor, the global SE sector is watching and learning.
5. Further investigation is required in the areas of intersectionality and feminine leadership, considering the 'depth as well as scale' and how gender intersects with race, disability, class, and geography within SE.
6. Research to determine the value of needs-based relational leadership at a time of increasing inequalities, climate impacts and democratic failure. How do we learn from models that have evolved to support community and ecological needs for the future?
7. Participants in this study repeatedly emphasised the importance of research that reflects lived realities rather than abstract policy assumptions. They praised the WiSE collaborative for its collaborative approach to this research study. For these reasons, participatory and co-produced research approaches led or shaped by women social entrepreneurs themselves are recommended going forward.
8. Research examining how government officers and intermediaries currently understand the Wellbeing Economy, which encompasses Community Wealth Building.

Conclusion

The Women in Social Enterprise (WiSE) Collective aims to effect change and make improvements for the greater good, supporting leadership through community development, deep rhizomatic growth, and alignment of resources and culture with local needs. Their approach values lived experience, fosters shared learning, builds peer support, and seeks to influence policy and practice in the SE sector.

This research examined how feminine leadership both shapes and is shaped in SE, exploring the character traits and motivations that underpin women's leadership as well as the personal, institutional, and policy challenges social entrepreneurs face, including barriers to funding, support, and recognition. Traits such as care, collaboration, and stewardship reflect deeply held personal and pro-social values, while motivations blend nuanced push-and-pull

factors. Comparisons with commercial entrepreneurship helped clarify the mechanisms and systems necessary to enable these leaders to flourish.

A feminist economic theory framework guided the study and informed its recommendations. Feminist economics considers the purpose of an economy to be the sustenance and enhancement of life, expanding conventional understandings of community wealth building to include wellbeing, equity, and ecological balance as essential outcomes. This seems to align with recent Scottish Government policy on Community Wealth Building within the Wellbeing Economy. Applied to SE, this lens highlights how care-based, collaborative, and accountable leadership actively redefines what counts as economic value. It positions social and environmental priorities as core infrastructure and supports democratic forms of leadership through women-led, feminine-informed leadership SEs.

To place the research in a Scottish policy context, the paper examined current policy through a gendered lens and found that SE policy is at best gender-neutral. The implications of recent changes to support for intermediary organisations were discussed from the viewpoint of research participants, who expressed concerns about a shift away from wellbeing economics towards more ‘capitalist’ expectations. The paper also shared a snapshot of the Scottish women-led SEs participating in the research to convey the contextuality and diversity of the SE landscape.

This led to an examination of women-led SEs with key findings outlined and their implications discussed. The results of our study contribute original, practice-based evidence that feminine-informed leadership is not aspirational or emergent but already operating at scale across Scotland’s SE ecosystem, even when invisible and without adequate resources or policy recognition. At the heart of all findings lies one core requirement: capitalist, heroic models of enterprise have demonstrably failed globally, and Scotland can be an exemplar of rhizomatic, non-linear economic growth towards community wealth at the national level. A model that is horizontal, adaptive, and relational through which women-led SEs already scale impact and depth without scaling size or singular growth. The central message of this research is that

Scotland would benefit from policy frameworks that are informed by, aligned with, and responsive to the feminine, relational, and iterative economic practices already emerging from the grassroots. Every component of the ecosystem, from the government, intermediaries, funders, and support bodies to networks and local enterprises themselves, should operate under the same principles. Women-led SEs already demonstrate shared power, reciprocity, distributed leadership, and deep listening from lived experience, which, in turn, nurture and support collective wellbeing, sustainability, and equality (all of which are at the heart of an economic policy focused on collective community wealth). These findings are grounded in first-hand accounts from women leading SEs across diverse geographies, identities, and organisational forms, offering rare insight into how alternative economic models function in practice rather than in theory. These practices, if adopted as mainstream, already provide the core ingredients of Scotland's Wellbeing Economy, which encompasses Community Wealth Building in practice.

In short, Scotland must adopt a feminine-informed approach to SE policymaking and sector development, one that listens, collaborates, redistributes power, and evolves iteratively with the people and communities it serves. This path leads to a resilient, equitable, inclusive and sustainable economy rooted in care, ecological stewardship, and collective prosperity. The good news is that little needs to be dismantled or rebuilt. Scotland already has the structural foundation, the policy ambition, the intermediary infrastructure, and, most importantly, the living examples of relational, care-led practice that demonstrate how a feminine-informed economy can actively generate community wealth, foster wellbeing, and strengthen social and ecological systems. The women leading these SEs have already traced the pathway; the system now needs only to adopt these practices as policy.

With modest but intentional shifts in emphasis, such as valuing impact, designing support, and listening to grassroots intelligence, Scotland can tap into the ecosystem of women-led SEs already in development. What this research reveals is not a call for a radical overhaul, but for a shared vision from the government to the grassroots (or rather, from the

grassroots to the government). Minor changes will allow the sector's existing strengths to be celebrated, connected, and amplified. If policymakers, intermediaries, and communities harness genuine listening and responsiveness already underway, Scotland is poised to lead the global movement toward a Wellbeing Economy. The case study exemplars are already there. The scaffolding is already in place. The practices are already flourishing. The future, if we choose it, is already beginning to take shape.

Statement of AI Assistance

Statement:

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-5.2 to assist with updating academic and grey literature sources on key themes, providing summaries of the most recent advancements in these areas, and improving the grammatical flow of the report. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

Details of Use:

- Literature Search: The tool was used to identify updated/recent key themes across recent publications, including feminist economics, alternative economic business models, gender and social enterprise and Scottish policy frameworks. All cited sources were manually verified for accuracy via Google Scholar.
- The tool was used to refine the paper's clarity and conciseness. No original data or conclusions were generated by the AI.

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Appendix One: Women in Social Enterprise (WiSE) Collective Research Proposal

Proposal for reinvestment funds for Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion

The Women in Social Enterprise (WiSE) Collective is a network of women leaders and change-makers committed to providing a strong collective voice to the marginalised, using our connections and creativity to bring radical change in communities.

Our mission is to support women to affect change and make improvements for the greater good, supporting leadership through community development and ensure resources and culture align to the true needs of the community.

Values include INCLUSIVITY, TRUST, BRAVERY, COLLECTIVE ACTION, ACCOUNTABILITY, RESPECT and KINDNESS.

Objectives

1. To create a proactive network of women to harness our collective energy and provide a voice to marginalised groups.
2. To encourage, engage and empower others to join our collective.
3. To encourage women to aspire to leadership roles by holding space and supporting them on that journey.
4. To celebrate and showcase success, highlighting stories and voices to raise the profile and impact of marginalised groups whilst also providing an honest reflection of the challenges faced.
5. To support and advocate for our members, whilst providing a customised and bold approach to addressing disadvantage.
6. To collaborate with others, raise awareness, advocate and hold accountable where needed.

We would welcome investment of £5,000 including VAT (we are not vat registered). For the following purposes:

1. An initial resource for research - deep dive in to census and other available data on women leaders in social enterprise, what are the enabling factors and characteristics as well as considering how the data stacks when we look at, size and scale as well as influence.
2. Some resource to start to consider these findings within the wider economy and within the context of increasing inequalities and climate change - what learning from our experience may be of value.
3. We will also consider intersectionality within the research findings.
4. We will bring together some initial data gathering on wellbeing and burnout for women leaders - within the increasing challenges, with recommendations on how best to collectively support women leaders.
5. We will host an event to bring us and this learning together to then inform more widely how the proposed activity will contribute towards achieving a sector that is open and welcoming to all.

We recognise that from the previous census data and from our experiences, the vast majority of social enterprises are led by women. Thus the learning we bring will enable us to support greater inclusion and take in to account intersectionality in terms of inequalities.

The key outcome(s) that will be achieved:

- A greater understanding of the enabling factors and challenges for women leaders in our sector.
- A greater understanding of intersectionality across women led social enterprises.
- Recommendations in relation to challenges and opportunities within the wider economy.

Recommendations on how best to collectively support women in social enterprise who will be involved in delivering the activity:

- We will invite proposals from folks with lived experience along with skills, knowledge and research capacity to undertake the research elements.
- We have identified an international independent external academic and research professional to assist us to steer the work.

How the work will benefit current and future social entrepreneurs:

- The findings and recommendations will assist current and future women social entrepreneurs and will also be of value in the context of the wider economy.

When the work will be done:

The work will start in March 2025, by inviting research proposal applications. We will also outline the detailed workplan for delivery.

The work will be completed from this first phase of work by January 2026 and we would hope to further build on this initial work by levering further investment once we start to identify some of the key findings.

Please provide feedback to:
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On Behalf of the WiSE Collective
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Campbeltown
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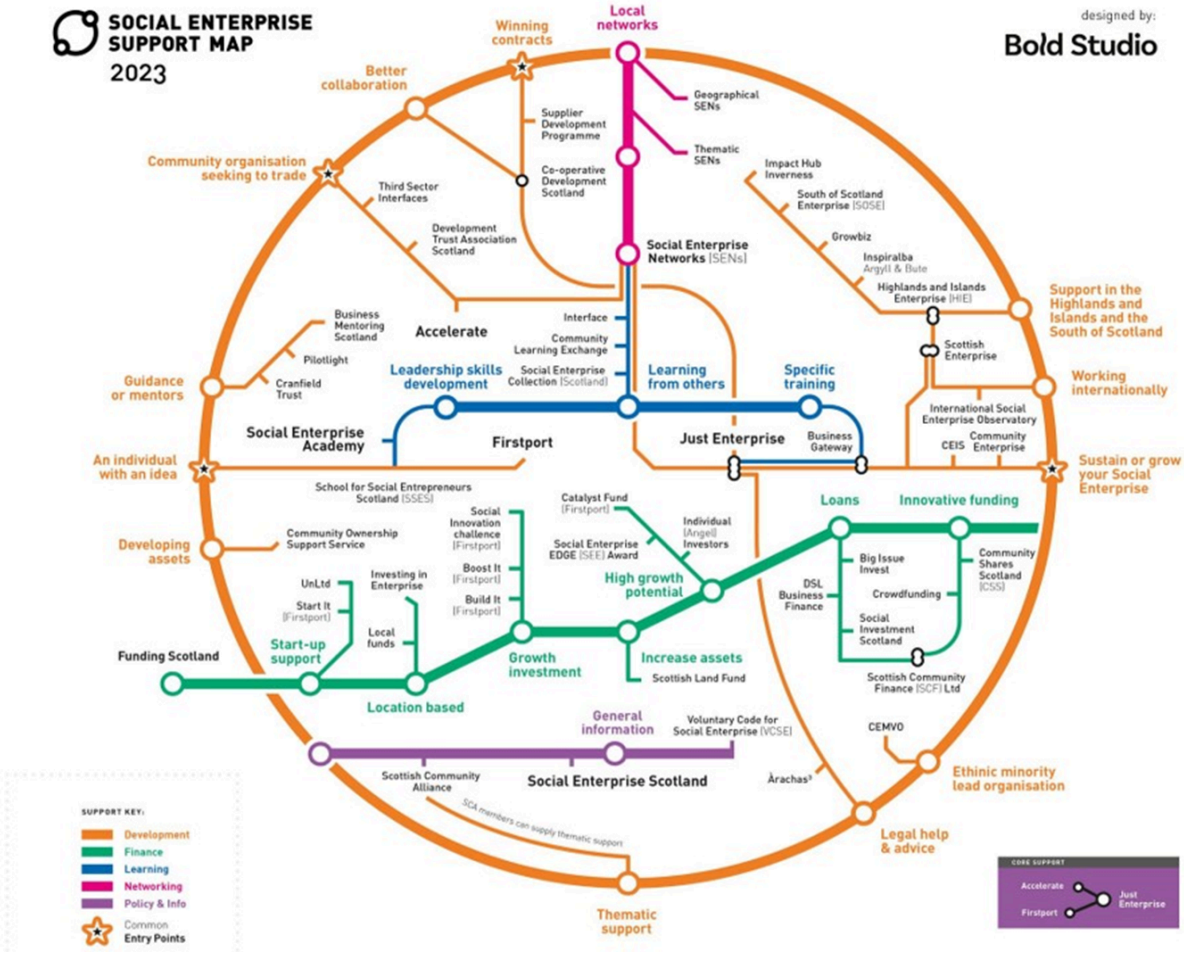
Appendix Two: Social Enterprise Support Map

Designed by Bold Studio

https://communityenterprise.co.uk/assets/uploads/PHOTOS/image-(7).png


SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SUPPORT MAP 2023
designed by: Bold Studio
Local networks
Winning contracts
Better collaboration
Community organisation seeking to trade
Geographical SENs
Thematic SENs
Supplier Development Programme
Co-operative Development Scotland
Third Sector Interfaces
Development Trust Association Scotland
Social Enterprise Networks (SENs)
Impact Hub Inverness
South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE)
Growbiz
Inspiralba Argyll & Bute
Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)
Support in the Highlands and Islands and the South of Scotland
Scottish Enterprise
Working internationally
International Social Enterprise Observatory
CEIS
Community Enterprise
Sustain or grow your Social Enterprise
Business Mentoring Scotland
Pilotlight
Cranfield Trust
Guidance or mentors
Accelerate
Interface
Community Learning Exchange
Social Enterprise Collection (Scotland)
Leadership skills development
Learning from others
Specific training
Social Enterprise Academy
Firstport
Just Enterprise
Business Gateway
An individual with an idea
School for Social Entrepreneurs Scotland (SSES)
Catalyst Fund (Firstport)
Individual (Angel) Investors
Social Innovation challence (Firstport)
Social Enterprise EDGE (SEE) Award
Loans
Innovative funding
Developing assets
Community Ownership Support Service
Big Issue Invest
Community Shares Scotland (CSS)
DSL Business Finance
Crowdfunding
Social Investment Scotland
Scottish Community Finance (SCF) Ltd
UnLtd
Start It (Firstport)
Investing in Enterprise
Boost It (Firstport)
Build It (Firstport)
High growth potential
Local funds
Start-up support
Funding Scotland
Growth investment
Increase assets
Scottish Land Fund
Location based
General information
Voluntary Code for Social Enterprise (VCSE)
CEMVO
Ethinic minority lead organisation
Scottish Community Alliance
Social Enterprise Scotland
Àrachas
SCA members can supply thematic support
Legal help & advice
Thematic support
SUPPORT KEY:
Development
Finance
Learning
Networking
Policy & Info
Common Entry Points
CORE SUPPORT
Accelerate
Firstport
Just Enterprise