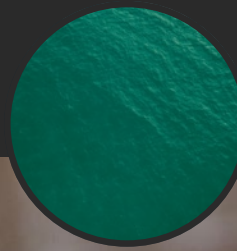
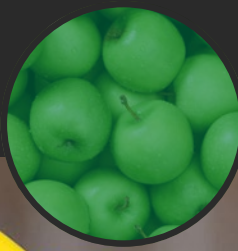
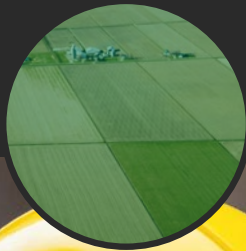


**SHAPING OPPORTUNITIES:**  
HOW EMPLOYERS ARE  
SUPPORTING WOMEN IN  
**AGRICULTURE, AGRI-FOOD,  
AND OCEAN CAREERS**

NOVEMBER 2025



## ABOUT ECO CANADA

Environmental Careers Organization of Canada (ECO Canada) is a not-for-profit corporation established in 1992 as part of Canada's Sector Council Initiative. ECO Canada is focused on identifying, communicating, and meeting the needs of environmental practitioners, employers, educators, and students. Its vision is to build the world's leading environmental workforce.

ECO Canada has supported Canada's environmental workforce by establishing professional development resources, training programs, and educational partnerships, conducting in-depth labour market research and providing the largest industry-specific job board.

ECO Canada's programs and services are developed through strong national partnerships, consultative strategic planning, and ongoing labour market research. Its labour market research provides valuable insights into environmental career trends, which can be used by governments, educators, youth, and industry partners to make decisions and formulate strategies. To learn more, please visit [www.eco.ca](http://www.eco.ca).

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We also thank Forum Research for their assistance with the survey.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian economy is diverse with many sectors providing critical components to Canadian prosperity. For this report, employers from three of those sectors – agriculture, agri-food, and ocean – were surveyed to understand the experiences of women in these industries and how their employers interact with them.

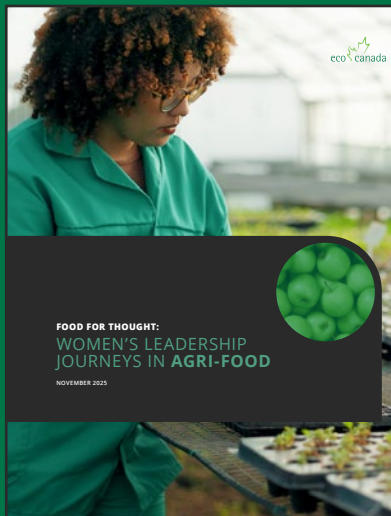
Women play a crucial and growing role in each sector. They contribute across broad supply chains by managing farms, running food and beverage manufacturing operations, developing Canada’s coastline, and much more. Despite their contributions to the sector, many women face barriers that limit their full participation.

In February 2025, we surveyed **386 employers** operating in the agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors. The survey explored systemic barriers to advancement and organizational initiatives that support career growth. It also examined how frequently women-focused career initiatives are evaluated and the extent to which employees are involved in developing strategies to address barriers and support women’s career advancement.

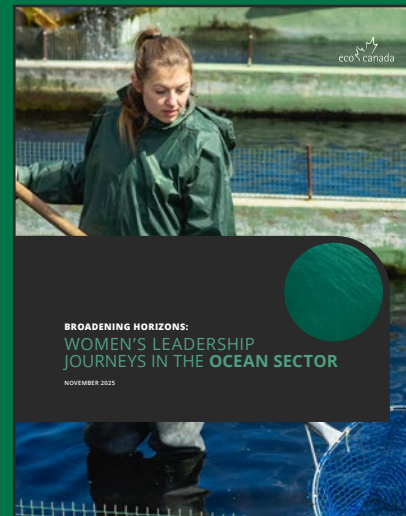
This survey was done in conjunction with a survey of 532 women, transgender, and non-binary employees across the same sectors. Separate reports can be found here:



*Voices from the Field:  
Women's Leadership  
Journeys in Agriculture*



*Food for Thought:  
Women's Leadership  
Journeys in Agri-Food*



*Broadening Horizons:  
Women's Leadership  
Journeys in the Ocean Sector*

## Survey Insights

**86%**

OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THAT WOMEN FACE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES IN THEIR CAREERS

**60%**

OF RESPONDENTS HAVE POLICIES OR INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT WOMEN IN THEIR CAREERS

**81%**

OF RESPONDENTS INVOLVE THEIR EMPLOYEES IN CREATING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S CAREERS

Women across agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors continue to face persistent barriers to career advancement, driven by both structural and cultural factors. Across all industries surveyed, **86% of employers acknowledged challenges for women**, with **workplace norms that reinforce traditional gender roles emerging as the most frequently cited barrier**. Challenges vary by sector:

- **Agriculture:** Traditional gender norms remain dominant, compounded by physically demanding roles and work-life balance pressures.
- **Agri-food:** Organizational practices—bias in hiring and promotion, limited leadership opportunities, and ongoing work-life balance challenges—are the main hurdles.
- **Ocean:** Gendered workplace norms and hiring biases persist, alongside physical demands in certain roles.



Despite these challenges, there is evidence of organizational efforts to promote gender equity: **60% of employers report having gender equality policies or initiatives**, though nearly half of all respondents either lack policies or are unaware of them. **Public sector organizations** lead in formalization, with **89% reporting policies**, compared with **57% in the private sector** and **62% in not-for-profits**. The most widely adopted initiative (20%) emphasizes **equal treatment for all employees, ensuring nondiscrimination across gender, race, religion, and other characteristics**.

Evaluation of women-focused initiatives remains inconsistent:

- **Access to high-profile assignments:** Only 46% of employers evaluate consistently, with the ocean sector leading (54%).
- **Transparent promotion pathways:** Just over half (52%) of organizations monitor these, highlighting a gap, particularly in agriculture.
- **Flexible work arrangements:** Most frequently assessed initiative, with 61% evaluated always or frequently, reflecting its critical role for women.
- **Mentorship programs:** Evaluated by roughly 47% of employers, though agriculture and agri-food lag behind ocean.
- **Professional development:** Systematic evaluation is limited; only 25% always and 30% frequently assess initiatives.

Employee involvement in shaping initiatives is relatively strong, with **81% of organizations engaging staff regularly or occasionally**.

.....

Women play a vital role across Canada's agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors, yet they continue to face significant structural and cultural barriers to career advancement. **While most employers (86%) recognize these challenges**, only **60% have formal policies or initiatives** in place to support women, and evaluation of such programs remains inconsistent. **Employee engagement in shaping strategies is strong (81%)**, indicating opportunities for organizations to leverage staff input and strengthen initiatives. Across sectors, gaps persist in **addressing gender norms, equitable promotion pathways, access to high-profile assignments, and professional development**, highlighting the need for continued systemic and organizational efforts to foster gender equity in the environmental workforce.

.....

# INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in Canada’s agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors is essential for the growth, innovation, and sustainability of these industries. Yet women continue to face barriers that limit their full participation and advancement in these fields. This report was prepared to provide a clear picture of women’s experiences in these sectors, identify the challenges they face, and highlight how employers are responding through policies, initiatives, and career development strategies.

In February 2025, we surveyed **386 employers** operating in agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors. The survey explored how women are represented across roles and levels, the systemic and cultural barriers that affect their career progression, and the organizational policies, initiatives, and programs aimed at supporting women’s advancement. It also examined how often these initiatives are evaluated and the degree to which employees contribute to shaping strategies that address barriers.

The insights gathered provide evidence of both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities, helping organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders identify strategies to support equitable career advancement and drive systemic change across the environmental workforce.



## Trends in Canadian Agriculture, Agri-Food, and Ocean Sectors

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The Canadian economy is broad, diverse, and essential to Canadian prosperity both at home and abroad. As economic, social, technological, and political trends shift, each sector must adapt, build sustainable practices, and develop strategies to thrive and support Canada's economic growth. This report focuses on three key sectors: agriculture, agri-food, and ocean industries.

While these sectors deliver vital goods and services that drive economic development, each represents a relatively small share of the overall Canadian economy.

### Sector Profiles (2021)<sup>1</sup>

---

#### Agriculture



#### TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

- Employers face difficulties attracting workers because of low interest in physically demanding jobs, limited labour availability in rural areas, and skill mismatches that require additional training investments (Khanal, 2025)
- Regulatory requirements can raise operational costs, and changes in global trade can have major impacts on the sector's long-term sustainability (Angus Reid Institute, 2024)
- Technology continues to play a critical role in scaling agricultural operations and improving efficiency (Huneke et al., 2024)

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<sup>1</sup> Employment data (Statistics Canada, Census 2021, Custom Tabulation for ECO Canada), GDP Data (Statistics Canada, 2021 and 2025), Business Count Data (Statistics Canada, 2021).

## Agri-Food



### TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

- Employers face challenges attracting and retaining workers, particularly in remote areas, and struggle to balance ongoing skill development with the pace of technological change (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2024)
- Regulatory decisions can sometimes create instability or uncertainty instead of fostering innovation, while trade developments may restrict access to key markets for products (Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, 2024)
- Technological advances can significantly boost productivity but may also displace traditional roles, creating new positions that require additional skills development (Information and Communications Technology Council, 2021)

## Ocean



### TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

- Recruiting talent is challenging due to limited public awareness of ocean-related careers, competition for STEM graduates, and the demanding nature of work in remote locations (Future Skills Centre, 2024)
- Government regulation and strategic planning have contributed to sector growth by providing clear direction and targeted investment priorities (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2024)
- Technological innovation has played a key role in reducing the environmental footprint of ocean-based industries. (Canada's Ocean Supercluster, 2024)

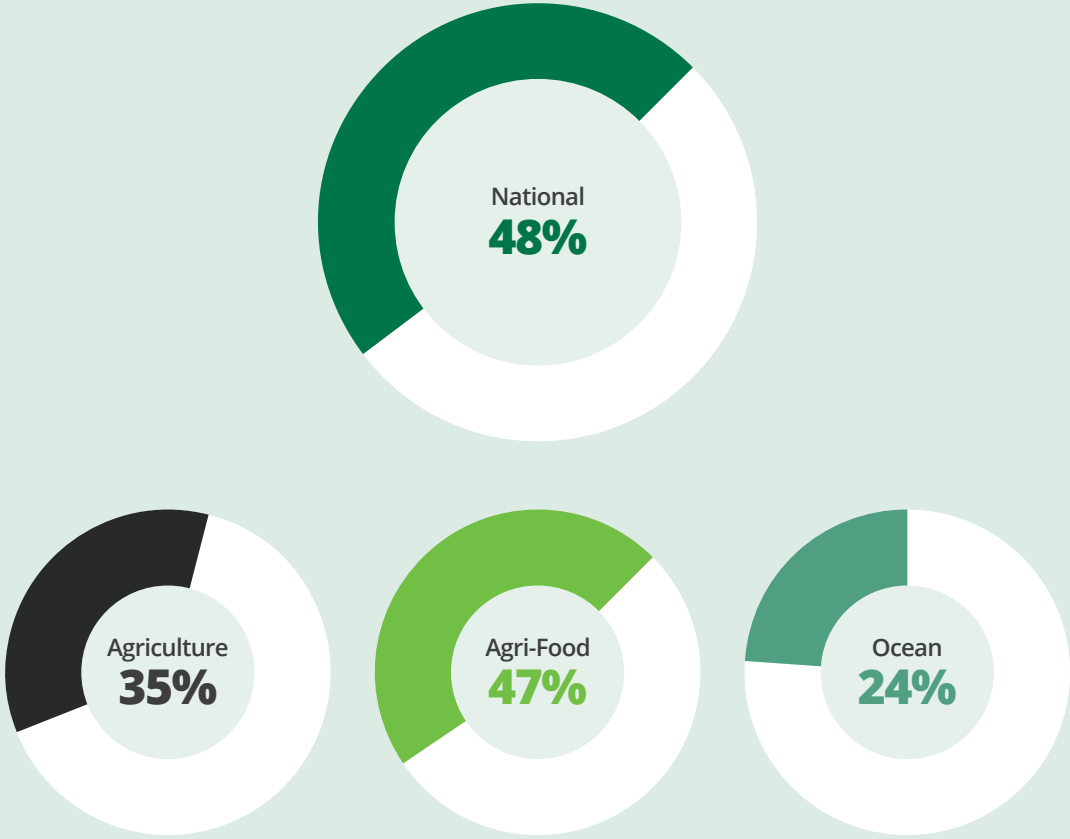
Reporting Note: Percentages in this report may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

# Women in Canadian Agriculture, Agri-Food, and Ocean Sectors

Women remain slightly underrepresented in Canada’s labour force, accounting for only 48% of all workers in 2021 (Statistics Canada, Custom Tabulation for ECO Canada). Their representation is even lower in specific sectors, with women making up only 24% of the ocean workforce, 35% in agriculture, and 47% in agri-food.

**Figure 1**

*Woman’s Share of Employment, by National and Sector (Census, 2021)*



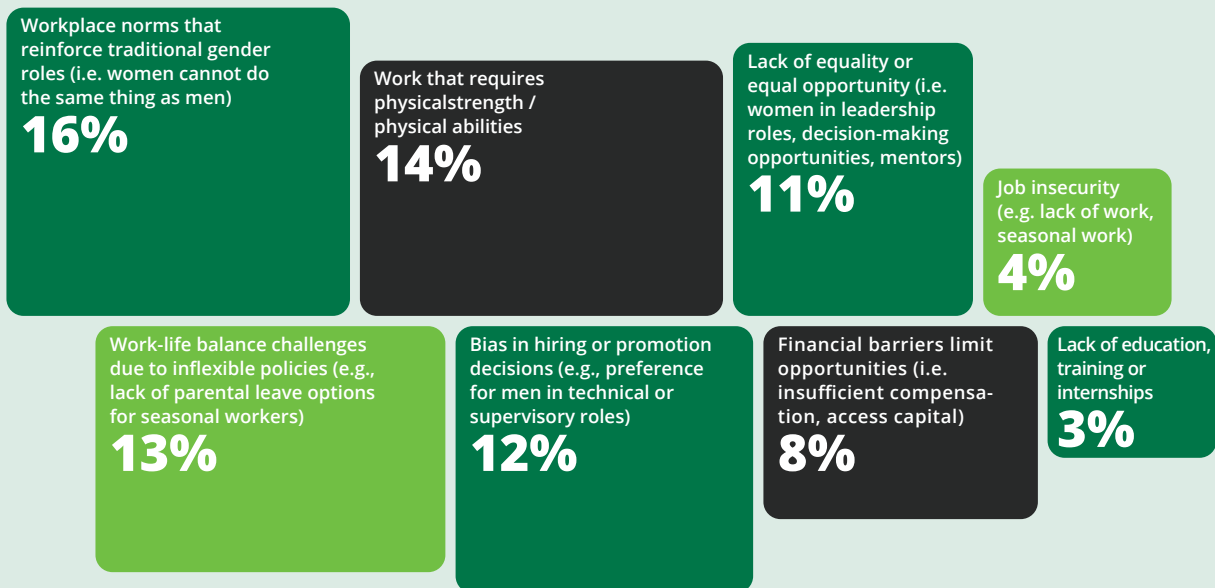
As these sectors confront critical challenges (i.e., labour shortages, trade barriers, and complex regulatory and technological landscapes), there are clear opportunities to develop policies and implement strategies that promote long-term sustainability. Research shows that women play a pivotal role in driving innovation adoption (Huneke et al., 2024) and are essential to understanding the social-ecological connections that underpin sustainable development (Gissi et al., 2018).

# SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

We asked employers to identify the most significant barriers faced by women in their industry. Overall, 86% of respondents reported that women encounter challenges in their workplace or industry, while only 7% said they did not. Several types of challenges were mentioned, with the most common being workplace norms that reinforce traditional gender roles, cited by 16% of respondents.

Figure 2

Significant Barriers That Women Face in the Workplace<sup>2</sup>



Women working in the agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors continue to encounter a range of structural and cultural barriers that hinder their career advancement. In agriculture, the most significant challenges stem from entrenched workplace norms that reinforce traditional gender roles, as well as the physical demands of certain tasks and difficulties balancing work and personal life. In the agri-food sector, barriers are more often tied to organizational practices, such as bias in hiring and promotion, limited access to leadership opportunities, and persistent work-life balance issues. The ocean sector faces similar challenges, where gendered workplace norms and hiring biases remain prevalent, and physically demanding roles further restrict participation. Research shows that while physically demanding work can deter workers across all groups, factors such as work-life balance and financial stability often play a greater role in attracting and retaining employees (Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Other and Misc. (20%) includes Other (13%), Women lack the desire to advance or have a long-term career in this industry (3%), lack of recognition for women's contributions in the industry (2%), and the challenges are the same for both men and women (2%).

**Table 1***Top 3 Significant Barriers Faced by Women in the Workplace, by Sector*

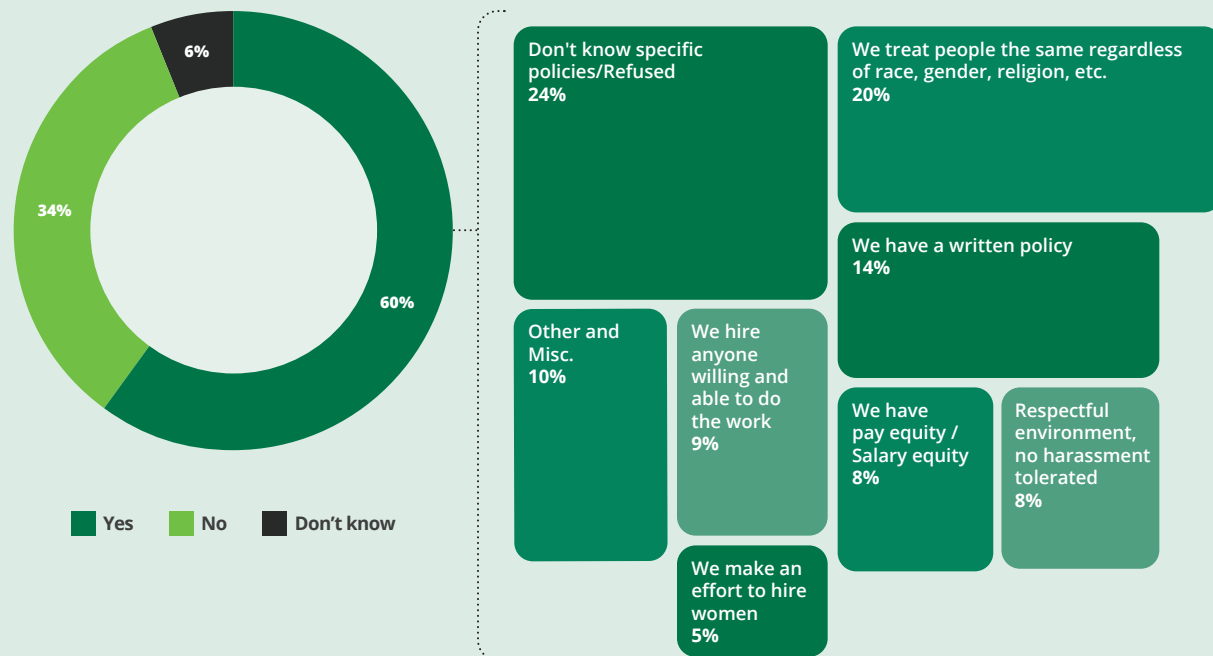
<b>Agriculture (n=264)</b>	
Workplace norms reinforce traditional gender roles (i.e., women cannot do the same thing as men)	<b>46 (17%)</b>
Work that requires physical strength / physical abilities	<b>36 (14%)</b>
Work-life balance challenges	<b>34 (13%)</b>
<b>Agri-food (n=79)</b>	
Bias in hiring or promotion decisions	<b>12 (15%)</b>
Work that requires physical strength / physical abilities	<b>14 (11%)</b>
Lack of equality or equal opportunity (i.e., women in leadership roles, decision-making opportunities, mentors)	<b>9 (11%)</b>
Work-life balance challenges	<b>9 (11%)</b>
<b>Ocean (n=41)</b>	
Workplace norms reinforce traditional gender roles (i.e., women cannot do the same thing as men)	<b>10 (24%)</b>
Bias in hiring or promotion decisions	<b>8 (20%)</b>
Work that requires physical strength / physical abilities	<b>5 (12%)</b>
Work-life balance challenges	<b>5 (12%)</b>

# ORGANIZATIONAL INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT WOMEN

Among respondents, 60% said their organizations have policies or initiatives to support gender equality, while 34% said they do not. Of those with such measures in place, 24% were unable or chose not to provide specific examples. The most commonly cited initiatives were ensuring equal treatment for all employees regardless of race, gender, religion, or other characteristics (20%) and having a formal written policy (14%). Approximately one-quarter of respondents who indicated their organizations had policies did not provide specific examples. This means that nearly half of respondents either do not have policies or are not aware of specific policies or initiatives. In comparison, a large U.S. study found that 80% of employers reported having gender diversity policies, with over 90% promoting respectful and inclusive behaviour, while fewer than 20% offered formal sponsorship programs (Krivkovich et al., 2024).

Figure 3

Initiatives That Employers Use to Support Women in the Workplace<sup>3</sup>

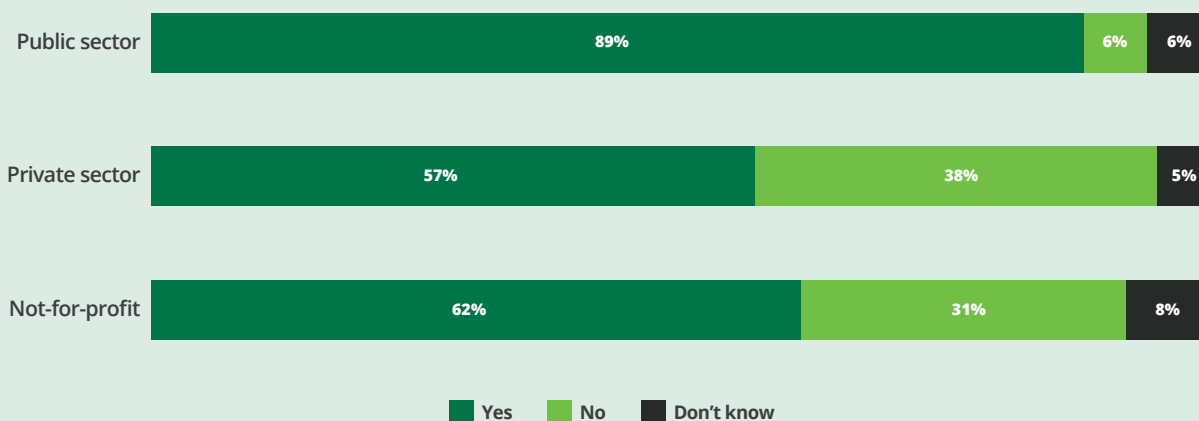


<sup>3</sup> Others and Misc. includes Other (5%), We hire according to skills/qualifications (2%), We do not have a specific or written policy (1%), We hire according to performance/productivity/quality of work (1%).

Public sector organizations are most likely to have gender equity and inclusivity policies (89%), compared to 57% of private and 62% of not-for-profit organizations.

**Figure 4**

*Presence of Policies or Initiatives to Support Women in the Workplace, by Organization Type*



**Table 2**

*Top 3 Initiatives That Employers Use to Support Women in the Workplace, by Sector*

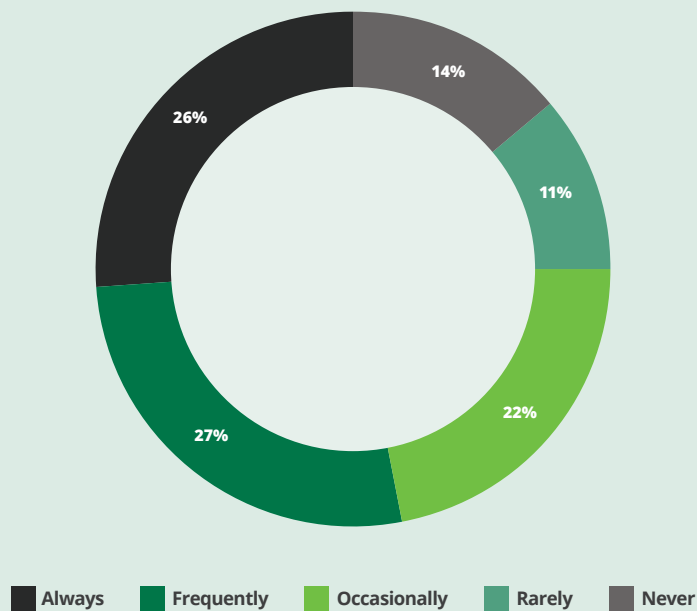
Agriculture (n=171)	
We treat people the same regardless of race, gender, religion, etc.	35 (20%)
We have a written policy	23 (13%)
We hire anyone willing and able to do the work	17 (10%)
Agri-food (n=60)	
We have a written policy	13 (22%)
We treat people the same regardless of race, gender, religion, etc.	10 (17%)
We have pay/salary equity	9 (15%)
Ocean (n=52)	
We treat people the same regardless of race, gender, religion, etc.	13 (25%)
Respectful environment, no harassment tolerated	7 (13%)
We have pay/salary equity	6 (12%)

# HOW FREQUENTLY WOMEN'S CAREER INITIATIVES ARE EVALUATED

We also asked employers how often they evaluate their initiatives that support women's career advancement. While more than half of employers (53%) reported that they *always* or *frequently* evaluate these policies, roughly one in seven employers *never* do. Below, the findings are divided by initiative and sector responses.

Figure 5

*Frequency of Evaluation, All Policies and Initiatives*

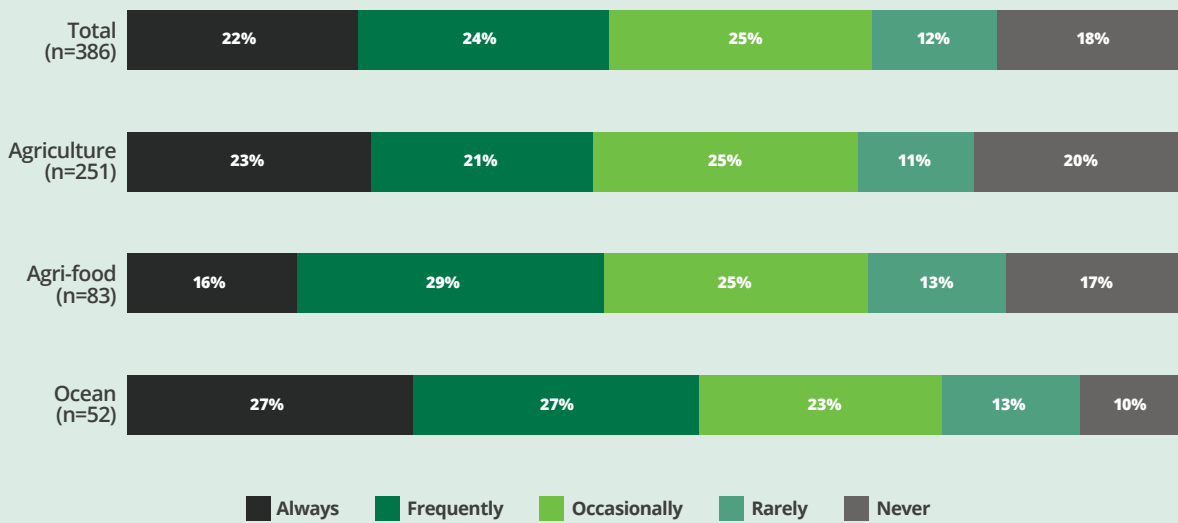


## Access to High Profile Assignments

Overall, 46% of employers report that access to high-profile assignments is evaluated **always** or **frequently**, while 30% say they are **rarely** or **never** assessed. The ocean sector reports the highest rate of consistent evaluation (54% **always/frequently**), followed by agriculture (44%) and agri-food (45%). These results suggest that although some organizations regularly review access to high-profile assignments, many do not, indicating an opportunity to strengthen monitoring and accountability across all sectors.

**Figure 6**

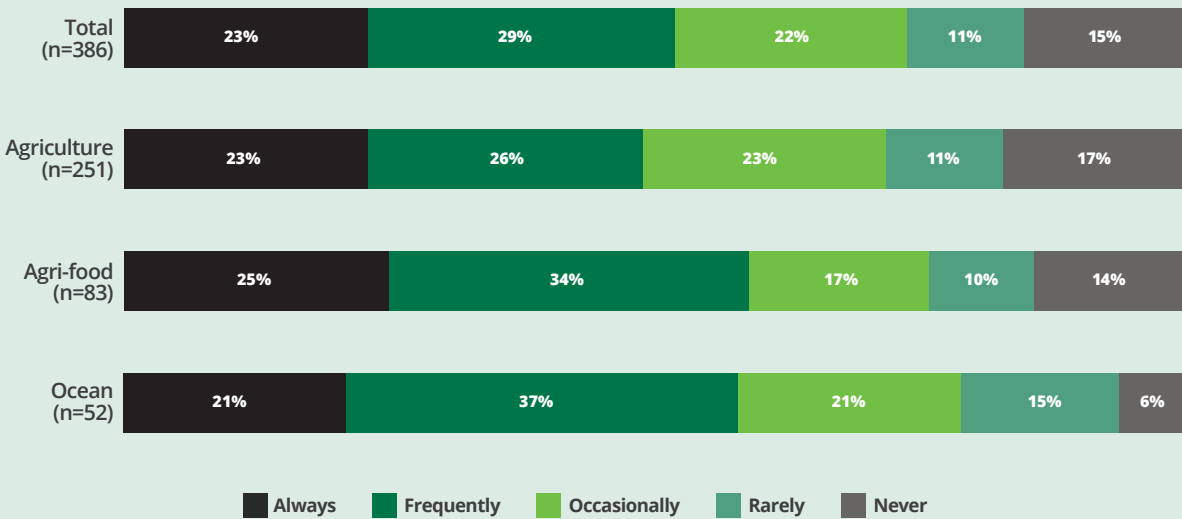
*Frequency of Evaluation, Access to High-Profile Assignments*



# Transparent Promotion Pathways

Overall, just over half of organizations (52%) evaluate transparent promotion pathways for women **always** or **frequently**, with the agriculture sector slightly behind. This suggests that while most organizations monitor these pathways, more consistent evaluation is needed, particularly in the agriculture sector.

**Figure 7**  
*Frequency of Evaluation, Transparent Promotion Pathways*

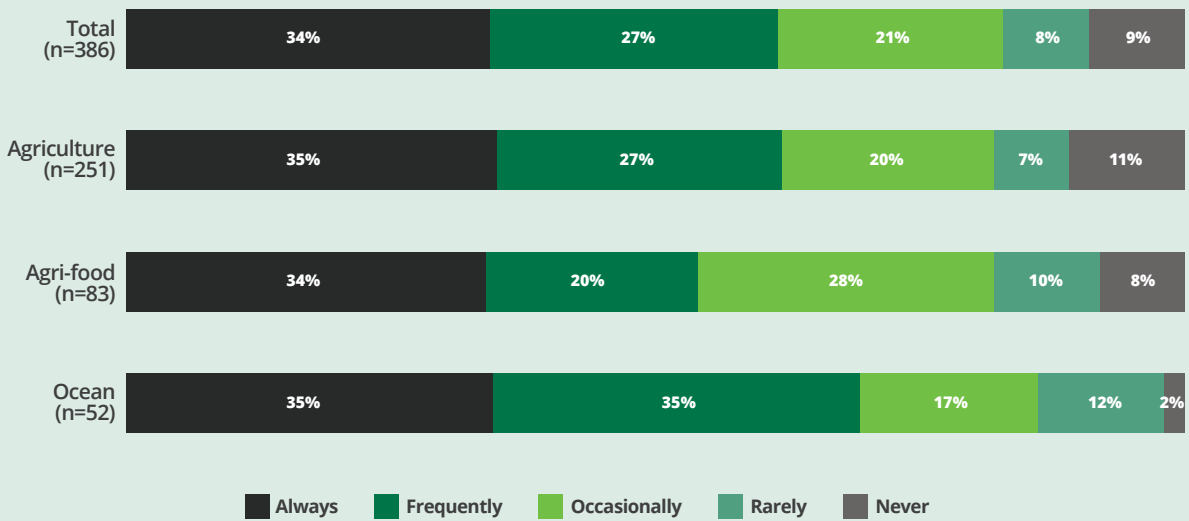


# Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are recognized as a key factor in supporting women’s advancement in the workplace (Edmond, 2023). Most respondents reported evaluating these arrangements **always** or **frequently** (61%), with this being the most frequently evaluated initiative among ocean sector (70%) and agriculture employers (62%). In contrast, agriculture employers were the most likely to report not evaluating flexible work arrangements (11%), while ocean sector employers were least likely (2%).

**Figure 8**

*Frequency of Evaluation, Flexible Work Arrangements*

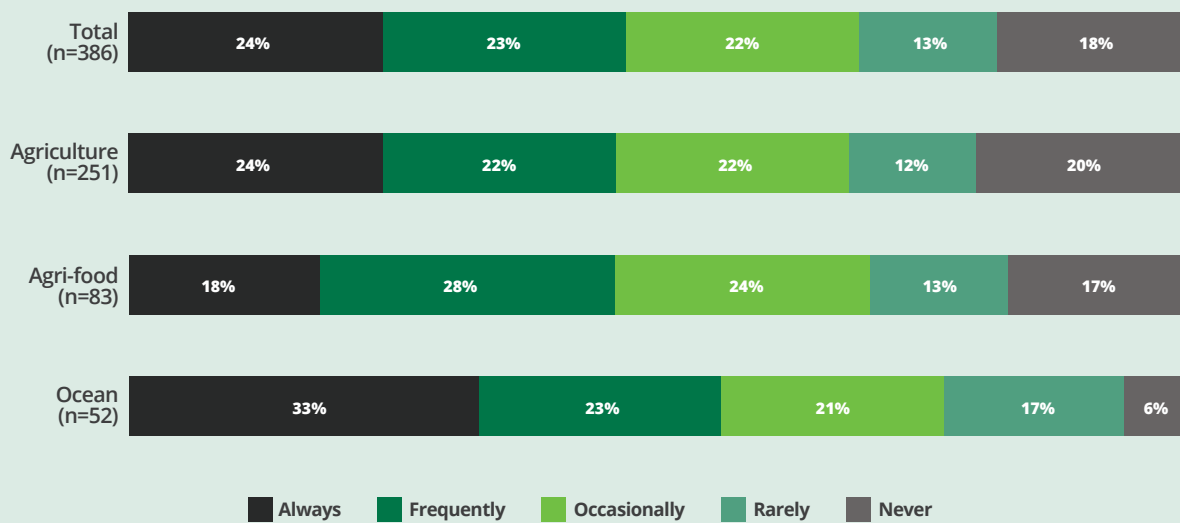


## Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs play an important role in helping women advance their careers (Pandit, 2025). Nearly half of respondents (47%) said they evaluated these programs **always** or **frequently**, with the ocean sector showing the highest rate at 56%. One in five employers in agriculture and nearly one in five in agri-food said they **never** evaluated their mentorship programs, compared to only 6% in the ocean sector. Across all sectors, roughly one in four **occasionally** evaluated mentorship programs.

Figure 9

Frequency of Evaluation, Mentorship Programs

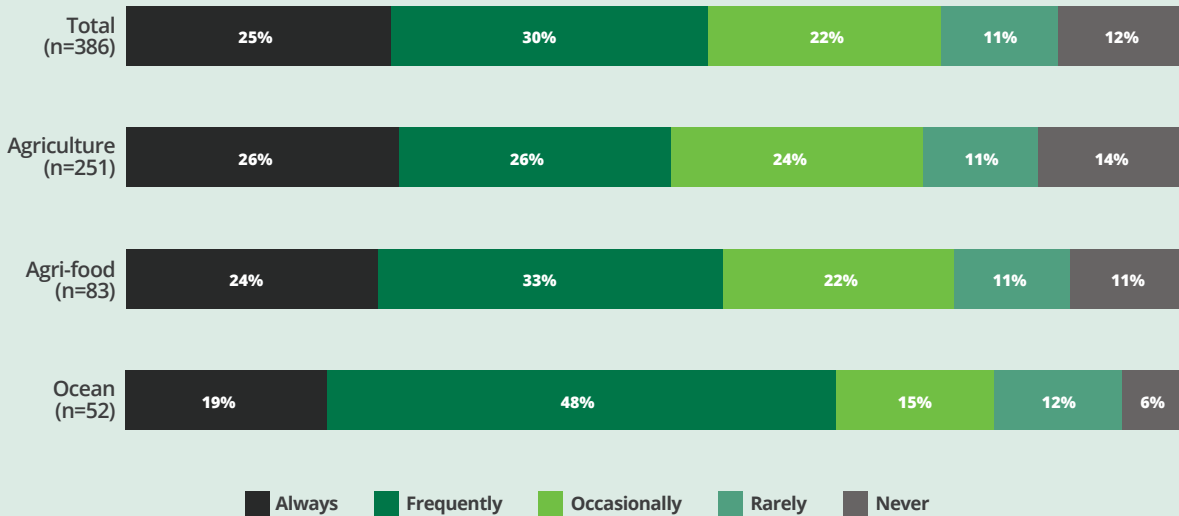


## Professional Development Opportunities

Organizations differ in how consistently they evaluate professional development initiatives for women. Overall, 25% reported **always** assessing these programs, and 30% did so **frequently**, while about 12% **never** conducted evaluations. By sector, the ocean industry was least likely to report **never** evaluating these programs (6%), and agriculture was the most likely (14%), highlighting the need for more systematic assessment to support women’s career advancement.

**Figure 10**

*Frequency of Evaluation, Professional Development Opportunities*



Overall, the evaluation of women-focused career initiatives varies by initiative and sector. Flexible work arrangements are the most consistently evaluated, with 61% of employers assessing them **always** or **frequently**, while professional development opportunities are the least consistently monitored. The ocean sector generally demonstrates the highest rates of consistent evaluation across initiatives, particularly for mentorship programs and flexible work arrangements, whereas agriculture and agri-food lag in systematic assessment. Across all sectors, there is considerable variation in monitoring practices, highlighting opportunities for organizations to strengthen evaluation and ensure that initiatives effectively support women’s career advancement.

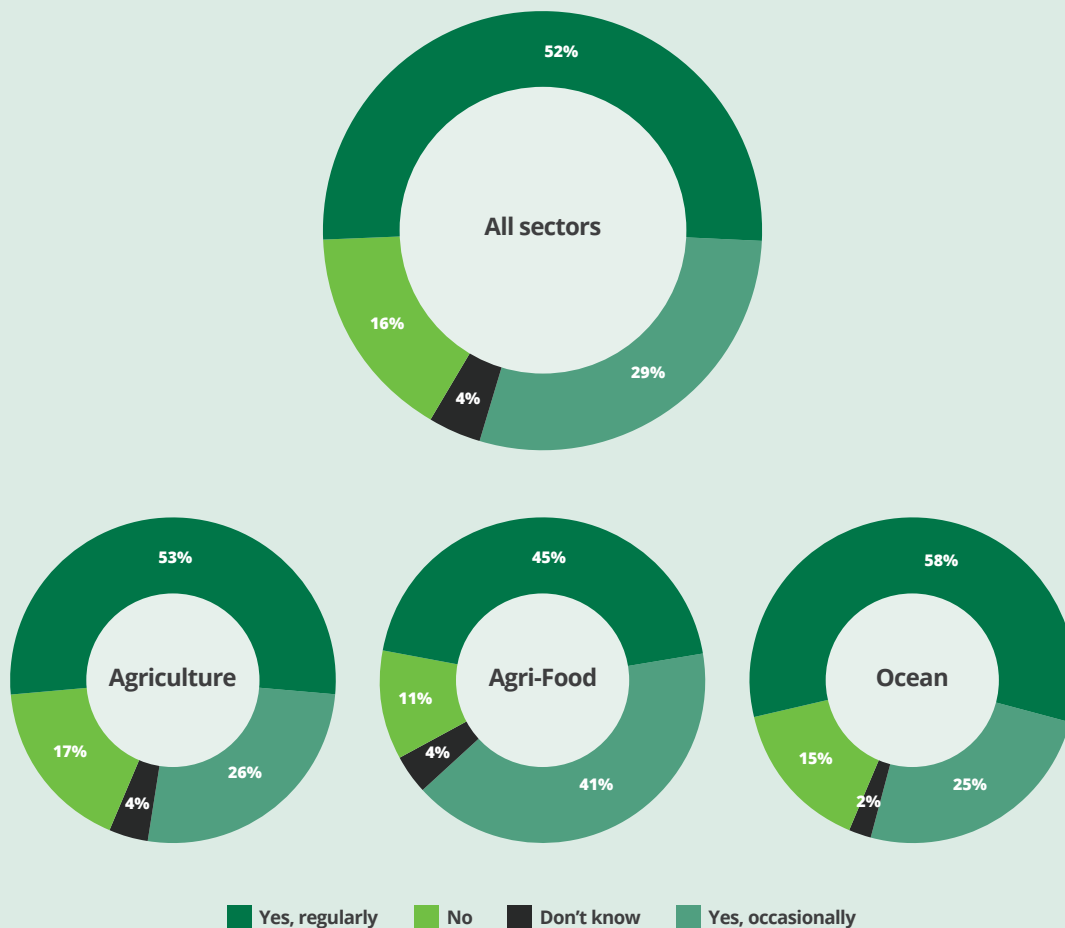
# EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT IN INITIATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Finally, we asked employers how often they engage employees in developing strategies to address barriers and support women’s career advancement. Overall, 81% of employers reported involving their employees either *regularly* or *occasionally*, while about 1 in 6 said they did not.

Employee involvement was highest in the agri-food sector (86%), followed by the ocean sector (83%) and agriculture (78%). However, when considering *regular* involvement, the agri-food sector had the lowest proportion (45%). Agriculture had the highest share of organizations that did not involve employees (17%), while agri-food was the least likely to report no involvement (11%).

**Figure 11**

*How Often Employees are Involved in Designing Initiatives*



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

The findings highlight clear opportunities for employers and industry leaders to strengthen gender equity across Canada's agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors. Building on employers' recognition of persistent barriers and growing engagement in gender-focused initiatives, the following actions are recommended:

## Formalize and Expand Gender Equity Policies

Many organizations lack dedicated gender equality policies or are unaware of existing ones. Establishing clear, written policies that are supported by leadership commitment and transparent communication can help set consistent expectations and foster accountability.

## Evaluate Initiatives Regularly and Systematically

Evaluation of gender equity initiatives remains uneven across sectors. Employers should adopt structured review processes to assess the impact of programs such as mentorship, promotion transparency, flexible work arrangements, and professional development, ensuring they address real barriers faced by women.

## Promote Inclusive Workplace Cultures

Persistent gender norms and biases continue to limit women's participation. Employers can counter this by embedding equity and inclusion training, recognizing diverse leadership styles, and ensuring equitable access to high-profile projects and decision-making roles.

## Invest in Targeted Skill Development and Mentorship

Expanding mentorship programs and professional development opportunities—particularly in agriculture and agri-food—can help women build the skills and networks needed to advance to leadership roles.

## Strengthen Employee Engagement in Equity Planning

With 81% of organizations already involving employees, this practice should be deepened and standardized. Regular consultation and co-creation of strategies ensure that gender equity initiatives reflect lived experiences and drive meaningful, lasting change.

# CONCLUSION

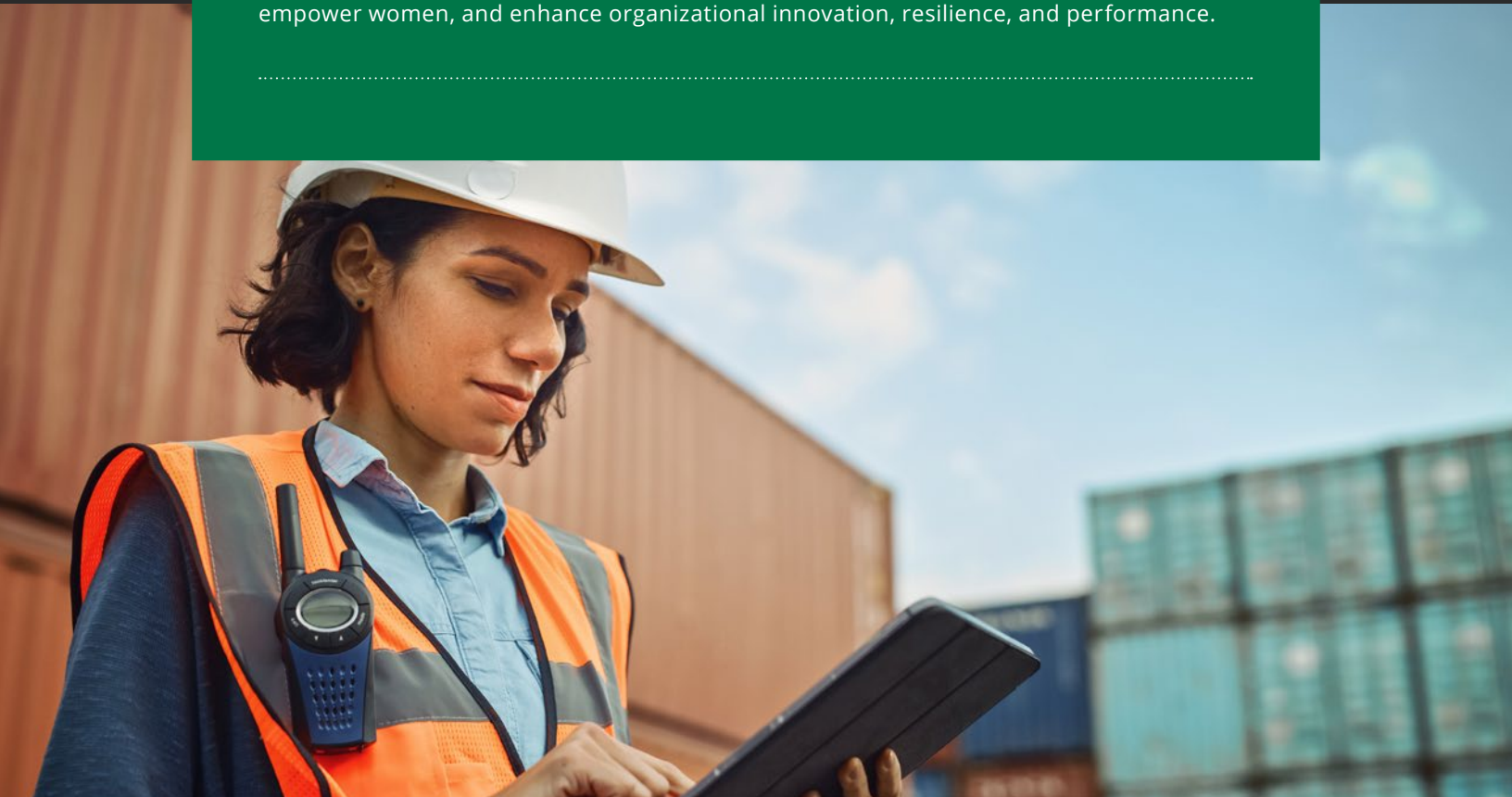
This research captures how employers in the agriculture, agri-food, and ocean sectors perceive, support, and engage with women in advancing their careers. The findings show that women continue to face a mix of structural and cultural barriers—from entrenched gender norms and organizational biases to physically demanding roles—with challenges varying by sector. The most significant obstacles to advancement include workplace norms that reinforce traditional gender roles, biased hiring and promotion practices, and physically demanding job requirements.

Many organizations have taken steps to address these issues through policies, mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and professional development initiatives. While 60% of employers report having formal gender equality policies, adoption is highest in the public sector, reflecting stronger institutional support, whereas private and not-for-profit sectors trail behind. Yet, the impact of these initiatives is uneven: evaluation practices differ by sector, and although employee engagement in program development is generally strong, it is not consistently applied to ensure initiatives address real-world barriers.

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**Implications:** These findings suggest that sustainable progress in women’s career advancement requires more than policies alone. Embedding consistent evaluation, active employee involvement, and sector-specific strategies can strengthen initiative effectiveness, empower women, and enhance organizational innovation, resilience, and performance.

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# APPENDIX A: WHO WE HEARD FROM

This section provides contexts of the organizations that were surveyed, including:

- 1 What sector do they operate in?
- 2 What is the size and business model of the organizations?
- 3 In which regions do they operate?
- 4 Are they Indigenous-owned or Indigenous-led?
- 5 What is the gender composition of employees and executive teams?

Respondents (n=386) come from agriculture (65%), agri-food (22%), and ocean (13%) industries.

Figure 12

*Respondents by Sector*



Most respondents work in the private sector (82%), followed by the public sector (14%) and not-for-profit or charity organizations (3%). Sector patterns vary slightly across sectors: the agriculture sector has the highest share of private sector respondents (86%), while the ocean sector shows a more diverse distribution, with 73% in the private sector, 17% in the public sector, and 10% in not-for-profit organizations.

**Table 3**

*Respondents by Business Type and Sector*

	Agriculture	Agri-Food	Ocean	Total
<b>Private sector</b>	86%	75%	73%	<b>82%</b>
<b>Public sector</b>	11%	18%	17%	<b>14%</b>
<b>Not-for-profit or charity</b>	2%	4%	10%	<b>3%</b>
<b>Prefer not to answer</b>	1%	4%	0%	<b>1%</b>

Across all sectors, most respondents work in small organizations (5–99 employees, 45%), followed by micro (0–5 employees, 23%) and medium-sized (100–499 employees, 23%) organizations. The agriculture sector is dominated by smaller employers, while agri-food and ocean sectors have a greater share of respondents in medium and large organizations.

**Table 4**

*Respondents by Organization Size and Sector*

	Agriculture	Agri-Food	Ocean	Total
<b>0-5</b>	29%	10%	10%	<b>23%</b>
<b>5-99</b>	49%	40%	35%	<b>45%</b>
<b>100-499</b>	16%	31%	42%	<b>23%</b>
<b>500+</b>	4%	18%	13%	<b>8%</b>
<b>Don't know</b>	2%	1%	0%	<b>1%</b>

Respondents mostly operated in Ontario (22%) and Quebec (21%), followed by Alberta (11%). Responses were highest for agriculture in Quebec (28%), agri-food in Ontario (27%), and oceans in Ontario (16%). Thirteen respondents (11 ocean and 2 agriculture) indicated that they also operate outside of Canada.

**Table 5***Respondents' Region of Operation*

	Agriculture	Agri-Food	Ocean	Total
<b>ON</b>	25%	27%	16%	<b>22%</b>
<b>QC</b>	28%	23%	8%	<b>21%</b>
<b>AB</b>	13%	12%	9%	<b>11%</b>
<b>BC</b>	5%	20%	8%	<b>8%</b>
<b>SK</b>	10%	3%	6%	<b>7%</b>
<b>MB</b>	8%	6%	5%	<b>7%</b>
<b>NS</b>	4%	2%	8%	<b>5%</b>
<b>NB</b>	3%	0%	8%	<b>4%</b>
<b>PEI</b>	1%	0%	8%	<b>3%</b>
<b>NL</b>	2%	0%	5%	<b>3%</b>
<b>NU</b>	0%	2%	5%	<b>2%</b>
<b>NT</b>	1%	3%	4%	<b>2%</b>
<b>YK</b>	0%	1%	5%	<b>2%</b>

About two-thirds of employers are neither Indigenous-owned nor Indigenous-led. Indigenous ownership/ leadership is highest in ocean industries (73%), followed by agri-food (43%) and agriculture (18%).

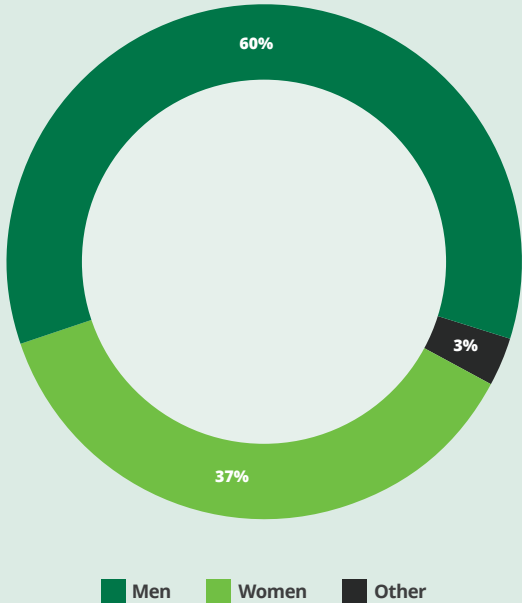
**Table 6***Respondents by Indigenous Ownership/Leadership and Sector*

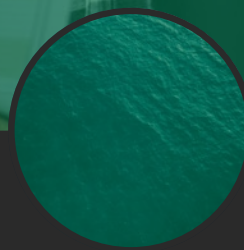
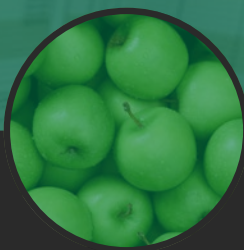
	Agriculture	Agri-Food	Ocean	Total
<b>Indigenous Ownership</b>	7%	23%	29%	<b>13%</b>
<b>Indigenous Leadership</b>	11%	20%	44%	<b>18%</b>
<b>No</b>	79%	51%	21%	<b>65%</b>
<b>Don't know</b>	3%	6%	6%	<b>4%</b>

Respondents indicated that their employee and executive gender make up was identical. While the methodology for this relied on estimates from respondents, the data does still align with known data breakdowns for gender make up.

**Figure 13**

*Gender Share of Employees and Executive Teams*





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