



DIVERSE*city*
community resources society



Advancing **Women's Leadership**

DIVERSE*city* x MINERVA
Women's Leadership Forum

A DIVERSEcity Publication • April 2025

➤ [DCRS.CA/WOMEN](https://dcrs.ca/women)

About DIVERSEcity

A registered charity in BC since 1978, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society strengthens communities by helping people build the life they want with inclusive programs and services, while working together with community partners to advance change for an equitable and sustainable world.

We recognize that our work takes place on the ancestral, traditional and unceded territories of the SEMYOME (Semiahmoo), q̓ícəy̓ (Katzie), kʷikʷəłəm (Kwikwetlem), q̓ʷa:ńłən (Kwantlen), q̓iqéyt (Qayqayt), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) and sc̓əwaθən məsteyəxʷ (Tsawwassen) First Nations.

About Minerva

Minerva provides leadership programs for women, girls and their partners to help advance gender parity and leadership diversity in BC.

Minerva acknowledges that its work takes place on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.



(From left) Emcee Ria Renouf, panelists Marisa Espinosa and Leya Behra, Tina Strehlke, Neelam Sahota, and panelists Karen Dosanjh, Christie Sparklingeyes and Nadine Nakagawa.

Inspiration and the DIVERSEcity x Minerva Women's Leadership Forum

What started as two women — Neelam Sahota, CEO, DIVERSEcity and Tina Strehlke, CEO, Minerva BC — discussing leading their respective charitable organizations over a meal has blossomed into an annual event that has inspired hundreds of women looking to grow, lead and bloom in their own careers and lives.

Starting in 2023, in celebration of International Women's Day, the DIVERSEcity x Minerva Women's Leadership Forum provides a space for attendees to reflect on what it means to be a woman leader, no matter what time or place in their life they are in. Whether emerging or established, immigrant or Canadian-born, this day gives participants a chance to share their stories and strategies on overcoming barriers, redefining what leadership looks like together and advancing equality for all women.

This DIVERSEcity publication provides a snapshot of the connections and takeaways attendees leave with to apply in their lives, workplaces and communities.

Women Leading the Way

THE BIG IDEA

What does it mean to be a woman leader today? What are the challenges and opportunities we face in our families, communities and workplaces? And how can we uplift and learn from each other to advance our careers and lives? For International Women’s Day, these are the questions being discussed at the DIVERSEcity X Minerva BC forum.

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“I think it’s about knowing yourself. The work that I do at Minerva, the work we do in our leadership programs is all about self-awareness and understanding. Who are you? What are your values? What’s your purpose? What are your strengths? What are you offering the world? And once you know that and you’re clear about that, you can find ways to step into those uncomfortable spaces.”

Tina Strehlke
CEO, Minerva BC



TAKEAWAYS

At the forum, panelists have shared practical advice and personal reflections about pivotal moments in their career and lives. Throughout these pages, you will find some of the inspiring takeaways shared on everything from knowing your worth, to breaking barriers, to supporting other women at a time where women’s equality continues to face inhospitable environments globally.

Neelam Sahota, CEO,
DIVERSEcity



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“The big piece is around finding your community. I think everyone has an opportunity, when you take an inclusive and holistic approach to gender equity, because inevitably, you will find your tribe. And within that community comes safety. And within that safety, it allows you to take risks. It allows you to push and advance in a way that you possibly couldn’t do on your own.”

On knowing your worth

“The idea of knowing your worth, and having a true understanding ... you’re the only person who can do that, and that’s important to everything you do. In my career as an engineer, I was often the only female in the room, I was often the only person of colour ... and I got the job offer and I saw my salary and I saw my jaw drop ... I did what I do best, I researched the heck out of it. I built a case ... and I took it in the next day. I think I earned more respect and it was a turning point ... when I’m facing a challenge where I have to speak up about something that’s uncomfortable. I think, ‘if I speak up now, what’s the worst that could happen?’ And I always remember to stay true to myself.”

— Leya Behra, Deputy Director of Climate Action, City of New Westminster, 2025 panelist



“It took me a long time to just show up as my whole self. That came with time and that came with confidence. And I’m working with people who are in technology, they’re data scientists, brilliant minds, you know? But they’re not what I am, so I would remind myself that I am the best at what I do, and bring that confidence into the room.”

— Karen Dosanjh, Vice President, OSI Digital, 2025 panelist

On breaking barriers

“I thought I could do this job on my own. I didn’t know that I needed to ask for help. I thought I just needed to prove myself and do it on my own. That’s where you collaborate, that’s where you reach out and ask for help ... because one perspective is not enough.”

— Christie Sparklingeyes, Talent Acquisition Manager, Castlemain Group, 2025 panelist



“Everyone is so anxious to get to the top so fast. You need the time to learn, take some risks, stumble, fail and climb back up again. Slow down a little bit, enjoy and learn. Don’t be impatient with yourself. Take your time and learn from the people around you. It is OK to stumble, just believe in yourself.”

— Cyndi McLeod, CEO, Global University Systems Canada, 2023 sponsor and panelist

“Surround yourself with people who can see your worth, who can see your greatness and your light, and they are not afraid of it, but inspired by it.”

— Efe Fruci, Founder, Odihi Foundation, 2023 panelist



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“I love International Women’s Day because it’s a time for us to step forward in the space of acknowledging not only all the wonderful women in our life, but also the progress we’ve made and the work that we need to do. The theme of female leadership is an important one because we show up in spaces differently. I’m the Attorney General, which is a position that usually holds a lot of power and prestige, but I show up as I am in that role, as someone who really wants to see change in the world. [But I do feel] the imposter syndrome that we as women carry. And I have tough days and wonder why do I still feel surprised when racism or sexism hits you in the face? ... But [as women leaders] we take on the challenges, break the barriers, we show up and try our hardest to make the world better.” — Honourable Niki Sharma, 2024 panelist

On rising to the challenge



“You might not feel like you’re not entirely worthy — I might not feel like it — but that’s the perfect opportunity to rise to the challenge. You won’t know until you try.”

— Sophie Lui, Global BC broadcaster, 2024 keynote speaker

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“I have been in infrastructure and transportation for 20 years now ... I’ve really seen the industry change a lot in those years. When I first started my career, I was often the only woman, certainly the youngest woman and often the only person of colour in the room. And I’ve really seen a sea of change happen. There is more to be done, but I’ve seen the industry grow and new opportunities emerge and new talent emerge.” — Marisa Espinosa, Director of Major Studies for TransLink Planning and Policy, 2025 panelist



On bringing others with you

“As we’re talking about standing up for ourselves as women, we cannot do that at the expense of trans, non-binary or gender non-conforming people. We cannot advocate for ourselves at the expense of immigrants, we cannot advocate for our safety at the expense of homeless people. It can’t just be about me blooming, or you blooming, we want the whole garden to bloom.”

— Nadine Nakagawa, a community organizer, creative writer and New Westminster City Councillor, 2025 panelist



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“I want to speak from a space of being bold. I did the Mudderella, a race for women where you climb to the top of a mountain and you come down and go through 10 challenges. I went with a team of 15 women and we were going to go up and come down as a group. Thirty minutes in, it was very clear that we were all women of different body types and we were all not going to be able to make it to the top together.

So, I told them, ‘You know what, let’s give ourselves the permission to go at our own pace. We’ll be more comfortable that way and we’ll meet at the end.’ So, we separated. Some of us stayed together for a while and continued to separate. It was three hours of hiking to the top. I was the last one in our group to get there. The most important part for me was when I was going down and I saw two of my colleagues who had finished come back up to me — to meet me where I was at. They were my biggest cheerleaders. They motivated me. And I got more energy from them. That’s what leadership is about. It’s not about getting the power and holding it.

Leadership is what you do with that power once you get it. We as leaders — and we’re all leaders in our own right — we can hold someone else’s hands. There is a lot of room at the top and we have to be bold enough to ask ourselves ‘I’m here now, but how many more people can I bring with me so they can reach their own goals?’” — **Trish Mandewo, City of Coquitlam Councillor, 2024 panelist**



2024 video recap



2025 recap



Finding Balance



THE BIG IDEA

At every Women’s Leadership Forum, we give attendees the opportunity to take a break, stretch their legs and get involved in a fun activity. Whether it’s a little bit of Zumba, a burst of Bollywood Fusion or giggles through laughing yoga, our goal is to bring lightness, energy and connection through these interactive and engaging moments.



Room to play & reflect

The “Grow, Lead, Bloom” edition of the Women’s Leadership Forum ended with a creative thinking session that made use of improv. Facilitator Ingrid Broussillon started with a group game to warm everyone up, then presented questions to people in randomized groups to further build on the ideas the panelists had shared with the audience.

Uplifting Each Other



The Women's Leadership Forum also serves as a way to highlight and support local women's initiatives, non-profits and women-owned businesses. Because of the generosity of our sponsors — including City of New Westminster, FortisBC, KPU, Dupuis Langen Group, YWCA and AMSSA in 2025 — we've been able to offer these opportunities to a variety of groups and women entrepreneurs.



Thank you!

A big thank you to everyone who made the DIVERSEcity x Minerva Women's Leadership Forum possible over the last three years. From sponsors to corporate delegations, staff to volunteers, attendees and everyone in between: your contributions and your time have made a difference.

If you'd like to be a part of the next Women's Leadership Forum on March 4, 2026, reach out to us at marketing@dcrs.ca.



Chloe Greenberg
Live interpretation of "Advancing Women in Leadership" DIVERSEtalks panel discussion
Acrylic on canvas
March 28, 2023



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