

GENDER-GAP RESEARCH: SYNTHESIS + BRAINSTORMING TAKEAWAYS FROM CO-CREATIVE WORKSHOPS 2024-25

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STRUCTURAL INHIBITORS

Women face both **structural** and **transactional barriers** to funding, rooted in systemic biases that restrict access to capital and reinforce exclusionary investment networks. Despite starting businesses at higher rates, female founders in the U.S. continue to receive a disproportionately small share of venture capital with just 1.8% in 2023, down from 2.1% in previous years (Davis, 2024).

FEMALE FOUNDERS:



Structural Barriers and Biases:

Female founders face inequities at every step of the journey compared to men. Things like the patriarchy, sexism, racism negatively compound a woman's entrepreneurial experience.



Motherhood Penalty/Fatherhood Bonus:

Women experience an average 4-6% loss in earnings while men increase earnings by an average of 4%.



No Access/Invitation to Influential Network and Resources:

Limited access to influential networks and resources prevents women from connecting with key investors, mentors, critical resources, and further opportunities, slowing or hindering their business growth.



Mental and Physical Health Consequences:

Women face operational challenges across their journey such as when trying to secure and effectively utilize funding, leading to long term stress and its negative health effects. They often hesitate to speak up, underselling their achievements and shying away from highlighting their strengths and capabilities.



Intergenerational Transfers of Trauma:

Systemic racism, patriarchy, and societal expectations are deeply embedded in the intergenerational transfer of trauma, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation and limited access to capital.

OPPORTUNITY SPACES:

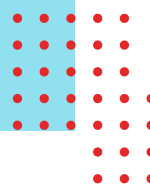
Networks of Networks:

- "The girls club" for early education
- Coalitions run by women for women
- Coalition of men who support this change



Mental Health:

- Heighten awareness
- Stress management
- 'Rest is a privilege'





STRUCTURAL INHIBITORS

The landscape of incubators and support organizations for entrepreneurs is often shaped by networks and program structures that inadvertently exclude diverse founders. Furthermore, reliance on personal networks, biases in selection processes, and a lack of inclusive spaces reinforce systemic exclusion, particularly for women and people of color, perpetuating underrepresentation in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

INCUBATORS AND ACCELERATORS:



Network Impact:

Program Managers rely heavily on personal networks, often forged through relationships more than open market calls or conscious outreach to diverse feeders, colleges, communities.



Program Design Lacks Flexibility:

Developed for people with ample time and money, and designed as intense immersive accelerated growth experiences, programs do not consider different founder lifestyles and needs. Seen as “time poverty bias” for women, women juggle dual responsibilities such as family care (child or elder) needs and primary job duties, needing either a longer time to complete a program or flexible options, both are rare to find and viewed as hindrances or weaknesses.



Vetting and Selection Bias:

Programs are often connected to VC, so they use the fund's criteria to select fellows, which often excludes many founders in sectors other than the most popular scalable tech, which predominantly attracts men, perpetuating exclusion.



Safe Spaces For Diverse Founders:

Women and POC are often underrepresented in the room, which can make it difficult to feel that the space is truly welcoming. Additionally, events are often hosted in venues like whiskey or steak houses, catering to stereotypically male preferences, further reinforcing a sense of exclusion.



OPPORTUNITY SPACES:

Vetted Data Base/Network:

- Founder resources: a public list of programs, networks, and resources for diverse founders, where programs opt-in and pledge to be welcoming

Accountability Metrics:

- Track, score, rank diversity of accelerators and incubator startup funders
- Cultural, social, financial repercussions for not supporting diverse startups

Education:

- Stress management understanding

Anonymize Startups:

- Blind pitches





STRUCTURAL INHIBITORS

Structural inhibitors in the investor landscape create barriers that limit opportunities for diverse founders. False perceptions, such as the idea that women are less trustworthy or capable, restrict investors from recognizing the potential of female founders, despite data showing their strong performance. This creates a closed-loop system that favors homogeneity and limits the success of diverse entrepreneurial ventures.

INVESTORS:



False Perception:

As a male-dominated industry, venture funding has inherent cultural biases that are not substantiated by data, which shows female founders outperforming men. Another bias is the perception that women are not to be trusted, often referred to as the 'Holmes Effect,' after Elizabeth Holmes, founder of Theranos. This was corroborated in the workshops.



Risk Appetite:

For a highly volatile and risky sector, investors often mitigate that risk by using self-limiting actions or herd mentality.



Traditions & Lack of Innovation:

Although this investor class enjoys the highs and lows of the startup experience, they lack the imagination and willingness to innovate within their portfolios or seek to diversify portfolios by sectors. This can be seen as lazy or traditional/conservative.



Competitiveness of Female Investors:

The investment ecosystem creates a closed-loop system that favors homogeneity and excludes diverse founders. This exclusion also extends to include women not supporting other women due to internalized gender biases or competitive tensions felt by female investors, perpetuating a cycle where women entrepreneurs do not have the same level of solidarity and support from their peers.



Cascade Effect:

Starting at the top of the chain, with trillions in assets under management, pension fund managers' restrictions, regulations, and conservative investment criteria set into motion a predictable behavior pattern of 'go with what you know' and 'trusted and tested' mindsets, so deviation from the norm isn't incentivized.

OPPORTUNITY SPACES:

Incentives:



- Work to incentivize pension fund managers to spread the love....

Accountability Metrics:

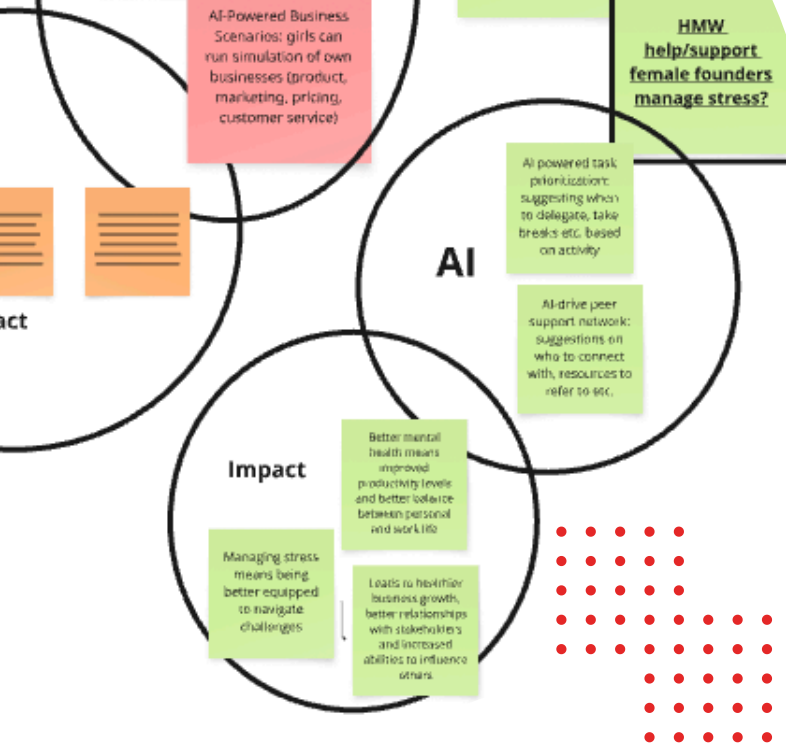


- Incentivize and rank investors by diversity in portfolio and incentivize quick funding through more qualitative data points

Anonymize



- Investment Data:
Deal evaluation



SOLUTION SPACES

During the brainstorming session, participants explored solution spaces across four key areas identified in earlier workshops: structural and systemic barriers, exclusion from diverse networks, biases within the investment landscape, and the mental and physical toll on female founders. Guided by a series of 'How Might We' (HMW) questions, participants generated ideas and used dot voting to identify and prioritize the most impactful concepts. The top-voted ideas are highlighted and summarized below, including where AI may play a positive role and its potential resulting impact.

Idea	AI Optimization	Impact
Create and share a vetted data base/network	<p>AI Application Screening: automatically analyze and vet applications based on bios, experience, and leadership signals</p> <p>AI Network Builder: Match mentors, suggest peer-led events, automate scheduling, and generate recaps</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fosters peer-to-peer learning Empowers women leaders by creating visible platforms Builds sustainable talent pipeline by connecting diverse voices
Create accountability metrics for accelerators and incubators	<p>AI Impact Dashboard: real-time dashboard tracks key metrics to reduce reporting fatigue</p> <p>AI Benchmarking Bot: compare cohort metrics against industry benchmarks and focus on the 2–3 most impactful diversity metrics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced transparency on agreed core metrics can result in higher trust with stakeholders Focusing on core accountability metrics ensures alignment across all stakeholders, enabling incremental change in diversity outcomes
Develop “The Girls Club” for early education and mentorship	<p>Smart Matching Algorithms: AI can match girls with successful female entrepreneurs (mentors)</p> <p>AI-Powered Business Scenarios: girls can run simulation of own businesses (product, marketing, pricing, customer service etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future role models for future generations Empower young girls to see entrepreneurship as more than just a career path - but as a realistic, achievable path to success that can become a passion





Idea	AI Optimization	Impact
Designing a coalition of male allies	<p>Mentorship: AI can match experienced entrepreneurial fathers with girls around the world who are showing a passion for entrepreneurship, pairing their skills, backgrounds, and interests to ensure meaningful and impactful mentorship connections.</p> <p>AI-driven content creation: to build strong storytelling scenarios and campaigns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coalition of dads of girls who support women founders could bring about systemic change in the startup ecosystem • Fathers who actively support women founders and entrepreneurs set powerful examples for both their daughters • By modeling supportive behavior, these fathers teach the next generation about the importance of gender equality
Anonymize investment data for deal evaluation	<p>AI-driven Anonymization: AI can scrub pitch decks, business plans, and applications of identifying details while preserving the core business idea. Investors then receive these materials based on selected key business indicators.</p> <p>Standardized evaluation and language: AI applied set of opportunity-focused questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystem-wide impact: setting a new industry standard for unbiased, data-driven funding levels the playing field • Greater innovation and economic growth • Shifting focus from risk avoidance to opportunity potential
Incentivize quick funding	<p>Automated due diligence: process financial statements, legal docs, market data etc. to streamline due diligence (reducing time and cost)</p> <p>Predictive funding models: AI assesses diverse startups and recommends investment opportunities with high growth potential based on performance indicators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in diversity and innovation in startup ecosystem • Increase funding rates while ensuring fairness • Increase in smarter investments with higher impact • Higher time-to-market • Smarter capital allocation

THEORY OF CHANGE

This multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together female founders, investors, incubators, and accelerators, is designed to drive systemic change and create meaningful impact. By aligning goals and leveraging diverse perspectives, the research conducted can successfully allocate more funding toward female founders, addressing longstanding disparities in capital allocation and opening pathways for more inclusive innovation and entrepreneurship.



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