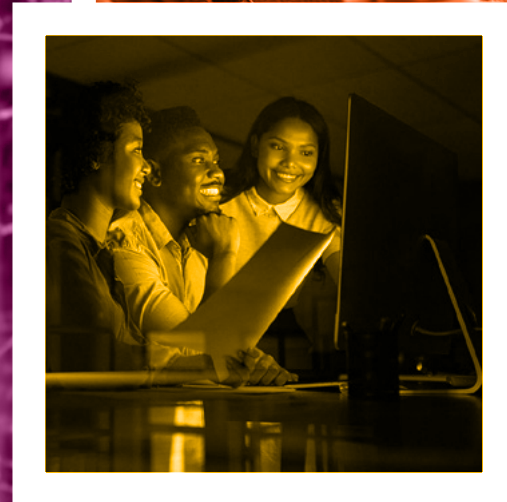
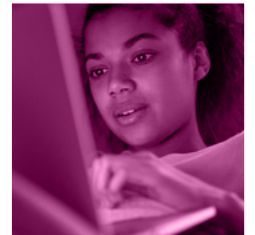




What the frontrunners are doing

A snapshot of gender inclusion among committed digital innovation ecosystem players and startups in Africa's technology sector



About

GIZ's Make-IT in Africa Programme

Make-IT
in Africa

Digital visionaries in Africa are developing a wealth of innovative solutions that can have a significant impact on people's lives and their environment. On their journey, however, they face numerous challenges that prevent them from developing these ideas to their full potential. Make-IT in Africa believes that only through a collaborative and systemic approach can we overcome these obstacles and create an environment that fosters innovation.

Make-IT in Africa, therefore, seeks to support national and pan-African innovation ecosystems and their actors to create a more resilient environment for digital visionaries. Within fit-for-purpose innovation ecosystems, new products and services that bring about social, environmental and economic change across Africa can thrive.

Make-IT in Africa is implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

<https://www.make-it.africa/>

Value for Women



Value for Women is a global pioneer with a mission to promote women's participation and leadership in business, finance, and investment in emerging markets. It does this through building individual leadership, equipping businesses, and driving innovation through data & research. Value for Women is a woman-led company, and its diverse team is spread across 5 continents and has expertise in countless sectors. Learn more at www.v4w.org.

GIZ & Value for Women Collaboration

During 2023 and 2024, GIZ's Make-IT in Africa initiative and Value for Women collaborated to increase women's participation in the technology and digital innovation ecosystem in Africa. They worked with a broad range of ecosystem actors and startups to improve their understanding of how to integrate a gender lens in both their internal workplace practises and in their products and services, including through a gender inclusion bootcamp with 25 enterprise support organisations; a gender self-assessment with 21 enterprise support organisations and 42 technology startups across 17 African countries; and in-depth gender-lens technical assistance to 3 of these enterprise support organisations and 3 of these startups.

This report offers insights on the status of gender inclusion in the African ecosystem and learnings which emerged during this collaboration, based on this sample of ESOs and startups with an interest in gender inclusion. It offers actionable recommendations for entrepreneurial support organisations and digital technology startups to further advance gender inclusion and build upon the progress achieved so far.

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Glossary

Entrepreneurial ecosystem:

The totality of existing entrepreneurial organisations, venture capitalists, angel investors, banks, universities, public sector agencies, financial bodies, and entrepreneurial processes and statistics. Together, these formally and informally link, mediate, and govern performance within the local entrepreneurial environment.¹

Entrepreneurial support organisation (ESO):

An entity that is explicitly founded to catalyse entrepreneurial activity and facilitate interactions within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It provides current or aspiring entrepreneurs with various forms of support to help them move closer to starting or growing a viable business. It also creates a supportive environment that encourages innovation and risk-taking and provides access to capital, with the ultimate goal of promoting entrepreneurial success and fostering economic growth. Accelerators, incubators, and business development providers are all ESOs, and they may even include an investment arm.

Gender-blind:

Failure to recognise that the roles and responsibilities of men/boys and women/girls are assigned to them in specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and backgrounds. Projects, programmes, policies, and attitudes which are gender-blind do not take into account these different roles and diverse needs.²

Gender diversity in the workforce:

This refers to the presence of women in the staff and leadership of a company, as well as the policies and practices that support gender diversity throughout the human resources cycle from recruitment and promotion to talent retention and workplace culture.

Gender-forward business:

Any business that intentionally seeks to address gender inequalities by providing goods and services that close gender gaps or meet the needs of women or girls; supporting gender diversity through internal policies and practices in the workforce; or strengthening inclusion and diversity across the value chain. Gender-forward business practices are the strategies, approaches, and practices that such gender forward businesses utilise to address gender inequalities.

¹ OECD definition used by GIZ and available [here](#)

² UNESCWA definition, available [here](#)

Gender-lens investing and entrepreneurial intermediation with a gender lens:

The deliberate incorporation of gender factors into analysis and decisions to improve social and business outcomes. Specifically, it refers to the actions and processes to intentionally invest in or support businesses and/or solutions that:

- Are women-led; and/or
- Provide products and services that intentionally seek to close gender gaps or that are designed to meet the specific needs of women or girls; and/or
- Promote gender diversity in the workforce through the implementation of progressive internal policies and practices, and strengthen the way business models reflect inclusion and diversity across operations; and/or
- Provide specific support and opportunities for women and women-owned and led businesses in their value chain.

Gender-transformative approaches:

Approaches that seek to challenge gender inequality by transforming harmful gender norms, roles, and relations, whilst working towards redistributing power, resources, and services more equally.³

Women-owned business:

The business was founded by a woman and/or is majority owned by a woman or multiple women.

Women-led business:

The majority (or a significant percentage) of leadership positions are held by women. This commonly looks at women in the C-Suite (Executive Management, Investment Committee, or Board of Directors).

Sex-disaggregated data:

Data that are collected and presented separately on men and women.

³ OECD definition, available [here](#)

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Executive summary

Across the world, gender diversity in leadership and amongst employees is linked to improved business outcomes, including higher profitability, return on investment, stock performance, and social performance.^{4,5}

Nevertheless, women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the African technology ecosystem: only 14.6% of African technology startups have at least one woman co-founder and in Sub-Saharan Africa, women in the technology industry account for only about 30% of the workforce.^{6,7} **Concerningly, the gender gaps persist amongst startups that access acceleration services.**

How can we close the gap between intention and action in achieving gender inclusion within Africa's technology and digital innovation ecosystem? This report captures the current state of gender inclusion among some of the most committed actors in Africa's digital landscape, analysing data and insights captured between 2023 and 2024 from 21 entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs) that directly support, train and – in some cases – fund technology startups, and 42 technology startups, all of which were seeking to advance their progress on gender inclusion.

4 McKinsey (2020) Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. Available [here](#).

5 Root Capital (2020) Inclusion Pays. The Returns On Investing In Women In Agriculture. Available [here](#).

6 Disrupt Africa and Madica (2023) Diversity Dividend: Exploring Gender Equality in the African Technology Ecosystem, available [here](#) and Connecting Africa (2023) Challenges and opportunities for womens' tech's careers, available [here](#).

7 UNDP (2019) Creating a Level Playing Field for Women in Technology in Africa, available [here](#)

It details what gender-inclusive actions these ESOs are taking for themselves and for their work with technology startups, as well as what gender-inclusive actions technology startups are taking. For both, it looks at what impact they have perceived on their business outcomes. Finally, it looks at where actions are lagging and provides recommendations.

These ESOs and startups that are seeking to advance their progress on gender are clearly front-runners on gender. They report significant numbers of women in positions of leadership, on their boards, in C-suite, and in middle management positions.⁸ These ESOs and startups not only recognise the importance of gender inclusion but also actively articulate their commitment to enhancing gender inclusion across their operations.

Yet even among these committed organisations, their ambitions often lack corresponding practices or strategies, leaving a substantial gap between intentions and actions. This discrepancy underscores a need for the sector to move beyond recognition of the importance of gender inclusion to the adoption of concrete, actionable strategies that operationalise these values in daily operations. Through the GIZ - Value for Women collaboration, several key findings have emerged.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Whilst many gender-interested ESOs and startups express a commitment to promoting gender equality, there is often a lack of formal policies or public statements to substantiate this commitment.

The majority of participating ESOs (67%) and startups (88%) see gender equality as core to their business. Nevertheless, progress is slow and tangible measures to move the dial on gender inclusion are needed. ESOs in particular have a role to support gender inclusion within their workplaces and within their work as advisors and coaches for technology startups, to support greater gender inclusion in the DNA of early stage startups.

2. Even women-led technology startups frequently do not consider how technology can help solve gender inequality or exacerbate it.

Technology can be a catalyst for gender inclusion by increasing access to products, services, and employment opportunities. Yet, inherent biases in digital service design and barriers, such as limited internet and smartphone access, often restrict women from benefiting from technological advancements. To address these obstacles and ensure women benefit from technology advancements, ESOs and startups need to be intentional and proactively integrate gender considerations in their technology design and strategies.

⁸ In our sample, ESOs reported 45% women on their boards; 46% women in c-suite positions; 56% women in middle management and 66% women in below middle management positions. Similarly, startups reported 42% women on their boards; 56% women in c-suite positions; 59% women in middle management and 48% women in below middle management positions. These numbers reflect a much higher average than is typical amongst technology startups in Africa.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 3. The collection, analysis, and use of sex-disaggregated data for decision-making can be improved even among ESOs and startups committed to gender inclusion.** Sex-disaggregated data collection is largely driven by donor targets, such as the number of women participants in programmes, and lacks a broader analysis of how those programmes are serving women. Often, it is assumed that men and women have the same interests, which leads ESOs and startups to overlook important insights that could improve their products and services. These blindspots can also limit future growth opportunities. On the workforce side, gaps – such as differences in workplace satisfaction levels between men and women – can be signs of larger workplace culture problems that are going unaddressed.
- 4. More ESOs and startups are actively trying to reach women as entrepreneurs and clients, but they need to deepen their knowledge and understanding of women customers.** Once ESOs and startups are sex disaggregating their data, as a next step they may need to gather additional information. Despite targeted efforts to reach women, only 24% of startups conduct market research to understand the unique needs of women or women-led businesses. Yet women are not a homogeneous group (e.g. varying age, ethnicity, ability) and have different needs and wants that change throughout different stages of their lives. ESOs and startups will get the best results by segmenting and designing their value proposition and product and service offering to speak to women's realities. Most ESOs and startups use online surveys, and complementing these with journey mapping, in-person focus groups, and direct feedback mechanisms can provide valuable feedback to tailor programmes and tech solutions to women's needs.
- 5. Measures to increase hiring diversity are more common than measures to support women already on the team.** 67% of both ESOs and startups report having taken measures to increase hiring diversity while, for example, just 29% of both ESOs and startups use clear promotion criteria detailing what is needed to be promoted to a higher job level. Committing to actions such as regular salary reviews and pay equity audits can aid in the retention and promotion of women. Not doing so risks increased turnover, which is expensive, amongst other negative business impacts for the organisation.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 6. Many ESOs and startups have legally-mandated risk-mitigating policies, fewer have policies to create an environment for women to thrive.** Most ESOs (95%) have policies on non-discrimination, equal opportunities, and anti-harassment, with startups also working to develop these policies though it is less common. Both ESOs and startups can build on this existing policy foundation to develop policies that create an environment for women to thrive.
- 7. Gaps remain in the availability of gender-specific support and training for even the most interested ESOs and startups.** ESOs and startups struggle to find gender resources to meet them where they are at in their gender inclusion journey and move from knowledge to action. Less than half of them have accessed even just short-term or one-off training, while 67% of ESOs and 48% of startups have never received any type of gender training. They also need more guidance to identify, implement and track the business outcomes of their gender strategies.

Participating ESOs and startups saw substantial business benefits from incorporating gender-inclusive practices into their business. After implementing gender-inclusive human resources practices, startups saw a 76% rise in women employee productivity and a 48% boost in women employee satisfaction. After regularly consulting women and women-led businesses for product and service design, startups experienced a 75% enhancement in market performance. For one startup, after using more sex-disaggregated data and feedback mechanisms to inform product design, monthly sales increased by 74%. Additionally, ESOs anticipate that in the longer term, they will also see improved retention and satisfaction among women entrepreneurs in their programmes and better access to finance for women entrepreneurs. The business case is clear.

In light of these gaps, and the business benefits that are largely being missed, there is a strong need for both ESOs and startups to establish policies that drive action on their gender equality commitments. They also need to use sex-disaggregated data more often in decision-making and integrate gender considerations into technology design. Moreover, we recommend deeper customer engagement beyond digital interactions, tailored approaches to meet the diverse needs of women entrepreneurs, and enhanced policies that create an enabling environment for women.

Finally, we want to emphasise the critical role of both ESOs and funders in providing gender-specific support that helps startups transition from awareness to actionable gender strategies. This is pivotal for nurturing an ecosystem where gender inclusion is a foundational and operational reality that unlocks women's central role in innovation and in social and economic development.



Introduction

This report is the result of a joint Value for Women and GIZ collaboration to accelerate business models and practices within Africa's technology and digital innovation ecosystem that actively challenge gender norms and promote equality. This ecosystem is defined by a dynamic interplay of talent, technology, capital, networking, entrepreneurial mindsets, and systems that come together to encourage innovation. As such, this collaboration unlocks women's central role in innovation, as well as in social and economic development.

Objective

The objective of this report is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on what gender-inclusive practices are being adopted by enterprise support organisations (ESOs) and startups operating in Africa that are interested in gender inclusion (providing a benchmark), how these practices are driving business success (further building the business case), and where further action is needed, even among this highly committed sample.

Audience

This report has been written primarily for ESOs and startups active in the technology and digital innovation ecosystem that want to deliberately incorporate gender factors into their analysis and decisions to improve business and social outcomes (this is called "applying a gender lens"), as well as for ESOs that want to support their digital innovation startup participants in doing so.

The findings of this report are also relevant for funders interested in gender inclusion as a performance strategy for their partners.

Additionally, the broader gender lens investing ecosystem will benefit from the findings and recommendations herein.

Methodology

This report draws from a literature review, self-reported gender inclusion data, and a variety of qualitative sources. The self-reported gender inclusion data was collected from 21 ESOs and 42 technology startups across 17 African countries that participated in an online gender self-assessment, utilising the [Gender Smart Nexus](#). This is a proprietary Value for Women tool which assesses gender-inclusive practices. The qualitative data was collected by Value for Women through its in-person gender inclusion bootcamp, key informant interviews, and in-person technical assistance with 3 ESOs and 3 startups conducted between October 2023 and March 2024. For detailed information on the sample, methodology, and study limitations, refer to Annex A.



The business case for gender inclusion and intermediation

Across the world, gender diversity in leadership is linked to improved business outcomes, including higher profitability, return on investment, stock performance, and social performance. Enterprises with higher gender diversity are 25% more likely to outperform their less diverse counterparts in profitability.⁹

Additionally, enhanced gender diversity amongst employees is associated with better business performance.¹⁰ Diverse teams are more innovative and make better decisions, leading to higher profitability and shareholder value.¹¹ Diverse teams also better reflect customer markets and can better serve their customer base.¹² Finally, inclusive workplaces attract a wider talent pool, enhancing employee satisfaction and retention.¹³

For intermediaries, bringing more women into entrepreneurial programmes enhances the benefits experienced by women participants and the overall impact achieved by programmes.¹⁴ Research by Value for Women in South Africa found that women showed higher impact outcomes from such programmes; they are more likely to apply what they learn, actively engage with their peers and share their insights after the programme ends.¹⁵ Additionally, a diverse cohort creates a more conducive learning environment for participants of all genders.¹⁶ Moreover, an increasing number of funders are now explicitly seeking gender-inclusive programmes, offering a competitive advantage to ESOs that meet these criteria and potentially improving their fundraising opportunities.¹⁷

9 McKinsey (2020) Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. Available [here](#).

10 Root Capital (2020) Inclusion Pays. The Returns On Investing In Women In Agriculture. Available [here](#).

11 McKinsey and Company (2020) Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters . Available [here](#) and Del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes (2023) Gender diversity, inclusive innovation and firm performance. Sustainable Development, 31(5), 3622–3638. Available [here](#) and Janjuha-Jivraj, S. (2021) Building Back Better: Why Gender Diversity Needs to Be at the Heart of the Innovation Agenda. Available [here](#).

12 IFC (2017) Investing in Women: New Evidence for the Business Case. Available [here](#).

13 Catalyst (2020) Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter. Available [here](#)

14 Value for Women (2022) A Journey Not a Destination: How Entrepreneurial Intermediaries and Investors Can Overcome 5 Common Stumbling Blocks in Becoming More Gender Inclusive. Available [here](#)

15 Value for Women (2021) Building women's businesses in South African Township Economies: A View on Intersectional Approaches to Entrepreneurial Support. Available [here](#)

16 Ibid

17 OECD (2019) Development Finance for Gender Equality and women's empowerment. Available [here](#)

Where gender inclusion is missing in Africa's technology and digital innovation ecosystem today

African women report the highest rate of entrepreneurial activity in the world: approximately 26% of adult women in Africa are involved in entrepreneurial activity.¹⁸

Nevertheless, women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the African technology and digital innovation ecosystem specifically, amongst leaders, founders, and employees: only 14.6% of African technology startups have at least one woman co-founder and only 9.6% of African startups have a woman CEO.¹⁹ In Sub-Saharan Africa, women in the technology industry account for only about 30% of the workforce²⁰, while in certain countries such as Tanzania, as an example, women make up only 20% of the technology workforce.²¹ Furthermore, those startups that are women-led in Africa tend to be stuck in the early phases of venture building, less likely to make the leap to being a scalable, high-growth venture.²² For example, of the total startup funding raised in Africa in 2022, only 4% of it went to women-led startups; men-led ventures raised the remaining 96%.²³ This gender disparity limits the industry's potential for growth and innovation.

This is largely due to the gender gap in access to the resources needed for establishing and growing a tech business. Women face significant barriers in securing funding, mentorship, networking opportunities, and support services. **As a result, they struggle to progress beyond the initial stages of business development.**

For example, women-led startups in Africa raised only \$188m (4%) in 2022, compared to male-led ventures that raised \$4.6bn (96%). They often have **limited access to formal financial institutions and investment networks.** Furthermore, formal laws do not ensure a level playing field. Although many African countries have made progress in removing legal barriers – including laws that deny women the same rights as men to register a business, sign a contract, open a bank account, or own and inherit property – only three African countries have formal laws that prohibit gender discrimination.²⁴

18 Harvard University Centre for African Studies (2020) Women and the Changing Face of Entrepreneurship in Africa, available [here](#)

19 Disrupt Africa and Madica (2023) Diversity Dividend: Exploring Gender Equality in the African Technology Ecosystem, available [here](#) and Connecting Africa (2023) Challenges and opportunities for womens' tech's careers, available [here](#).

20 UNDP (2019) Creating a Level Playing Field for Women in Technology in Africa, available [here](#)

21 Tanzania Digest (2023) Driving Innovation: Unlocking the Potential of Tanzanian Women in Technology, available [here](#)

22 Ibid

23 Ibid

24 World Bank Group African Region Gender Innovation Lab (2018) Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the potential of women's businesses in Africa available [here](#)

In Africa today, a significant number of ESOs recognise the need for their programmes to promote greater inclusion and equity, provide targeted support for women-led startups, and address structural barriers. There are notable examples of ESOs in Africa that are working hard to address gender gaps, and are rolling out programmes to better recruit and support women entrepreneurs. There is also a noticeable rise in women-focused accelerators and investment funds with a desire to implement gender-lens investing strategies. Yet the **equity gap persists amongst startups that access acceleration services.** A recent study found that on average, women-led ventures raise nearly US\$100,000 less in equity and secure less than half as much new debt than men-led ventures.²⁵ There is a lack of consistent understanding of the challenges and best practices in the design of accelerator services to see more women accessing capital and growing their businesses.

Some of these ESOs are not only addressing structural barriers but are catalysing gender inclusion in the technology startups they support. At Value for Women, we have seen that most technology startups, despite their commitment to gender equality or women's empowerment, struggle to take concrete steps to implement gender equality in their operations. Moving from awareness to action is critical.

This is critical because technology can either bridge or widen the gender gap, depending on how well it addresses women's specific needs. Technology can provide solutions to women's specific needs through e-learning platforms, telemedicine, and digital marketplaces. It can also provide platforms for networking and mentorship, offer tools for building and demonstrating skills, and provide new advocacy channels. However, if not carefully designed with women's needs in mind, technology risks perpetuating existing inequalities. This is due to biases in the design of digital services (often due to the low number of women in the STEM sector), algorithms that perpetuate gender stereotypes, smartphone accessibility, and the gender digital divide. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits one of the largest gender gaps in mobile internet usage globally (37%), with over 190 million women not accessing mobile internet services.²⁶ In Kenya, only 10% of women used a mobile phone to get information on products and services compared to 22% of men.²⁷

Startups in the programme noted how factors such as **limited internet, affordability and smartphone access** adversely impact their women clients and supply chains. This research aligns with studies indicating that women face disproportionate disadvantages as users of digital and technological products and services.

Addressing these challenges requires proactive measures to ensure technology serves as an equaliser, benefiting both women and men, and not just a privileged few.

25 Abigayle Davidson, A. & Hume, V. (2020): Accelerating Women-led Startups. A Knowledge Brief by the Global Accelerator Learning Initiative, available here. Note that this global research mostly includes accelerators in emerging markets, with 25% of the dataset from Africa. Other research on accelerators focused only on Africa are unavailable, yet the conclusions of this report are broadly applicable to Africa and also substantiated through the qualitative findings from this research

26 World Bank (2023) Accelerating Gender Equality: Let's Make Digital Technology Work for All. Available [here](#).

27 Ibid.



How is the African technology and digital innovation ecosystem addressing the gender gaps?

With women still underrepresented as leaders and employees in the African technology and digital innovation ecosystem and new technologies being able to better serve women, we see **the need for the sector to move beyond recognising the importance of gender inclusion to begin to adopt concrete strategies for gender inclusion.**

A great place to start is by shining a light on what is being done by ESOs and technology startups already working to increase gender inclusion. We share this in this section. And we want to be clear: these data and experiences come from a unique sample, where 93% of the startups have a majority (or significant percentage) of leadership positions held by women – well beyond the 14% industry average. They include everything from an accelerator that supports startups to digitise non-tech industries, to a poultry farming company using Internet of Things (IoT) and a health technology startup.

FINDING 1

While many gender-interested ESOs and startups express a commitment to promoting gender equality, there is often a lack of formal policies or public statements to substantiate this commitment

Both ESOs and startups in our sample agree on the importance of gender inclusion. Specifically, 67% of participating ESOs and 88% of startups have a mission or objective that is explicitly focused on gender, or are currently developing one.²⁸ Furthermore, 62% of ESOs have gender-specific targets to increase the number of women-led startups in their programmes, and 64% of startups intentionally target women as a specific client group, demonstrating a proactive approach to gender inclusion through a focus on women as a crucial client segment.

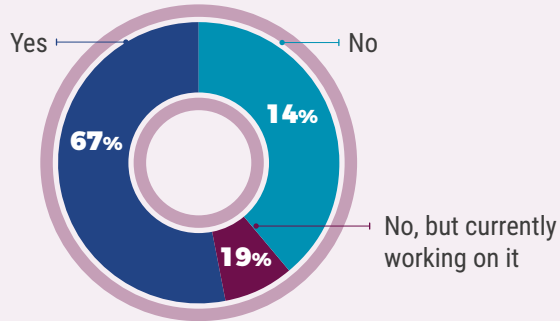
Despite this, there is a noticeable gap in the implementation; only 19% of ESOs have an explicit gender strategy. In contrast, startups show more robust results, with 67% having an explicit gender strategy in place.

²⁸ This information is further expanded on in Figure 1.

21 ESOs and 42 startups taking action on gender inclusion took a gender self-assessment, and this is what we saw.

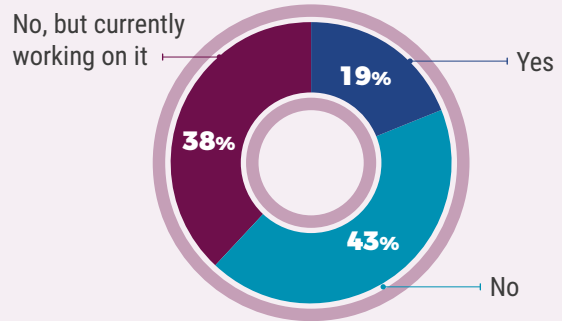
Among ESOs...

Figure 1. ESOs with a Mission or Objective Focused Explicitly on Gender



67% of participating ESOs have a mission or objective focused explicitly on gender.

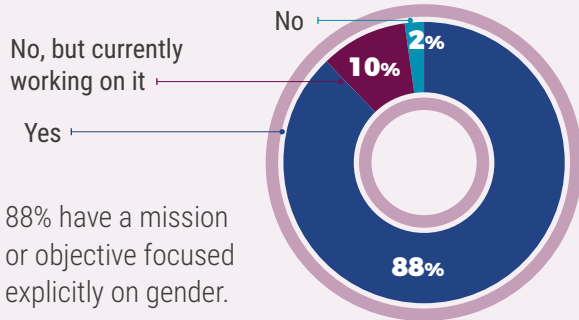
Figure 2. ESOs with an explicit gender strategy.



19% of participating ESOs have an explicit gender strategy.

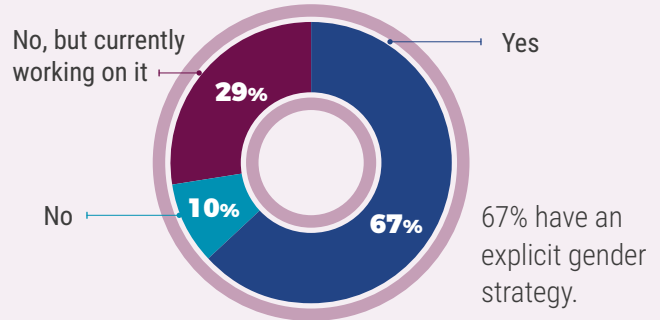
Among Startups...

Figure 3. Startups with a mission or objective focused explicitly on gender



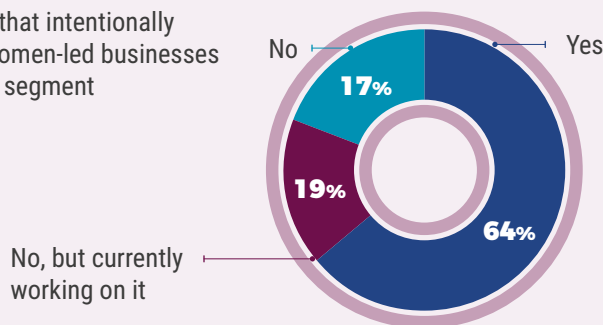
88% have a mission or objective focused explicitly on gender.

Figure 4. Startups with an explicit gender strategy



67% have an explicit gender strategy.

Figure 5. Startups that intentionally target women or women-led businesses as a specific client segment



64% intentionally target women or women-led businesses as a specific client segment.

BOX 1

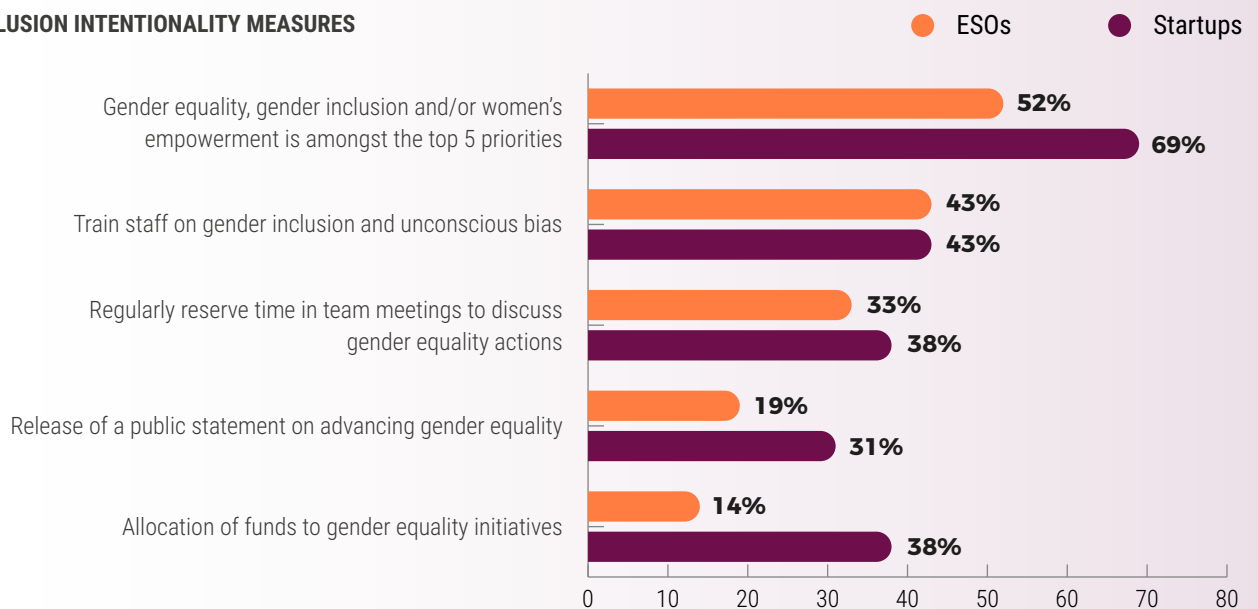
This data comes from the [Gender Smart Nexus Gender Lens Survey](#), taken by participating ESOs and technology startups in Africa in 2023 and 2024. This online, self-paced, holistic self-assessment looks at the organisation's gender-inclusive practices and offers practical recommendations on how to take gender-smart action. It shows where the organisation already is and what is needed. At Value for Women, when we start working with a new client— be it an entrepreneurial support organisation or an investment fund or startup— we have found that the best way to start is with this survey.

More than 80% of ESOs and startups in our sample meet the definition of a women-led business, defined by having either majority women ownership, women in leadership or a significant representation of women on their Board.

Yet as questions become more practical, progress diminishes. For example, only 14% of ESOs and 38% of startups in our sample have demonstrated their commitment to gender inclusion through specific budget allocations. Only 19% of ESOs and 31% of startups have solidified their commitment with a public statement. To advance gender inclusion, there is a need for both ESOs and startups to implement tangible strategies and allocate necessary resources to move from intention to action.

Figure 6. Key intentionality measures taken by ESOs (N=21) and startups (N=42)

GENDER INCLUSION INTENTIONALITY MEASURES



ESOs in our sample also reported on how they operationalise gender inclusivity in their interactions with entrepreneurs and startups. Their strategies to support these entrepreneurs and startups reveal a varied approach, demonstrated in Box 2 below:

21 ESOs took a gender self-assessment which reported on their work to support gender inclusion in their interactions with entrepreneurs and startups, and this is what we saw

All ESOs that reported “applying a gender lens” in their work with entrepreneurs and startups are focusing on women as entrepreneurs. Among the ESOs who report “applying a gender lens to their practices”, they predominantly focus on women as leaders (57%), entrepreneurs, (100%), and employees (43%), with a less explicit focus on women as clients (29%) or suppliers (48%).

Figure 7. The businesses or lives that ESOs seek to improve

ESOs are taking a variety of actions to support gender inclusion within the businesses they support or invest in.

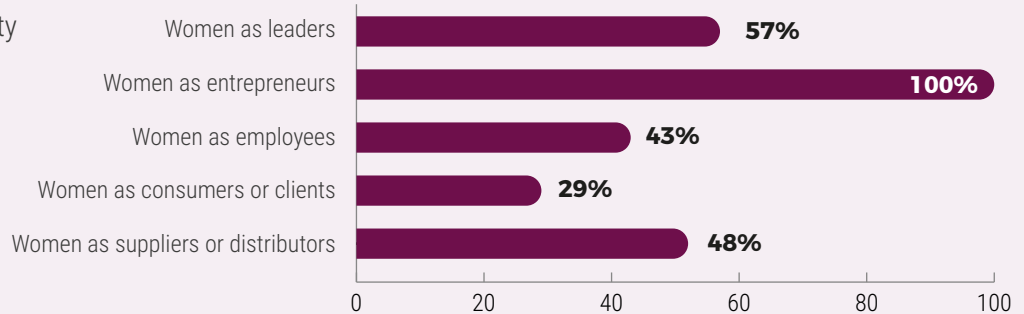
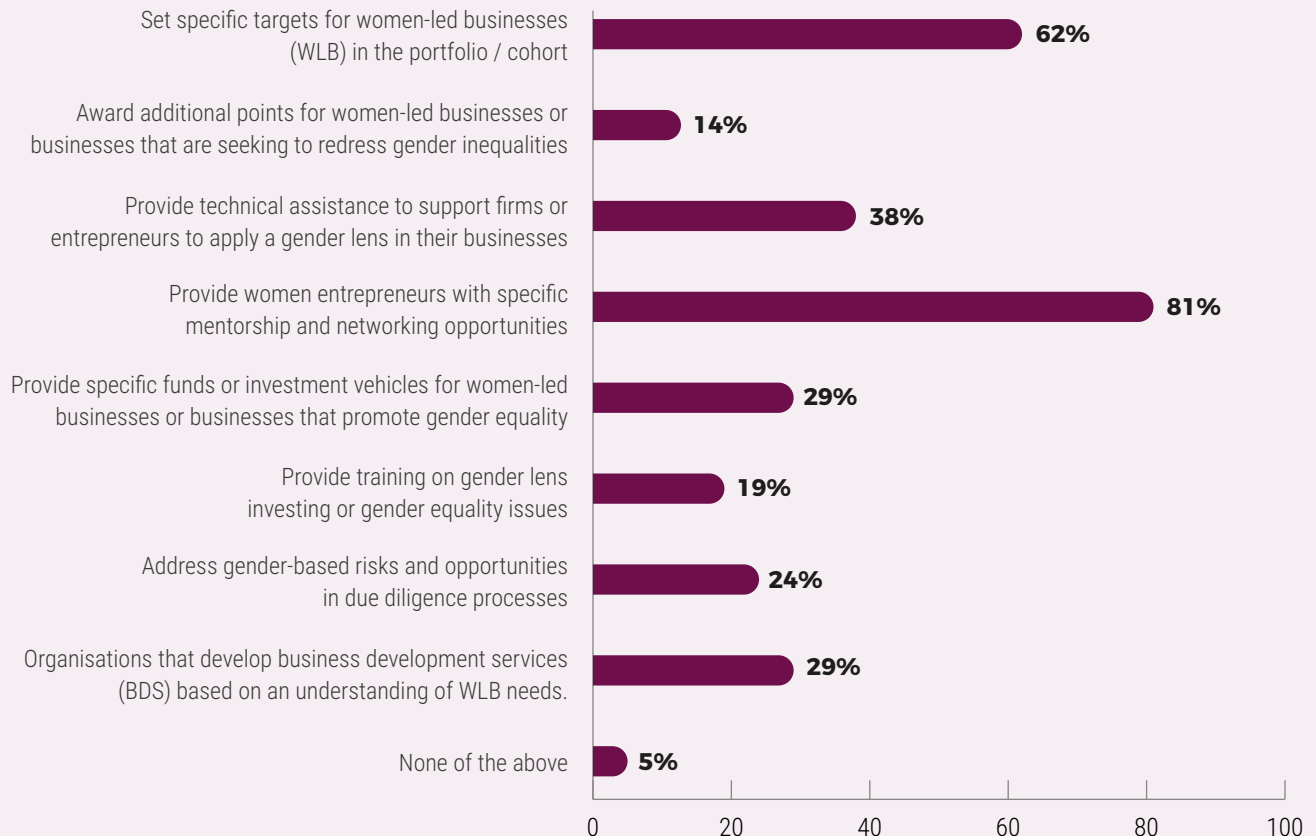


Figure 8. ESOs show the practical actions taken with regard to the businesses invested in or supported





This gap between intention and action underscores the need for substantial support and adequate resources.

ESOs in particular have a role to support gender inclusion, not only internally within their own workplaces, but also externally in their roles as mentors and advisors to technology startups, to support greater gender inclusion in the DNA of early-stage startups. Whilst organisational size and the informal nature of early-stage ventures may contribute to the challenge, we have found that scalable, low-cost interventions and proactive investment in gender-focused support are feasible and can significantly enhance business performance.

FINDING 2

Even women-run technology startups frequently do not consider how technology can help solve gender inequality or exacerbate it

Technology can be a catalyst for gender inclusion by increasing access to products, services and employment opportunities. Yet this opportunity is often hindered by inherent biases, including discriminatory practices in digital service design, the pervasive gender digital divide, stereotype-reinforcing algorithms, and the scarcity of women in STEM fields. To address these obstacles, ESOs and startups need to be intentional to ensure women benefit from technology advancements.

Startups in the programme recognised that limited internet, affordability and smartphone access adversely impact their women clients and their supply chains. Yet, before joining the programme, few of the startups were actively considering ways to overcome this.

Other digital platforms in this sample highlighted how the job opportunities they offer are particularly advantageous for women, offering the flexibility to work remotely and balance their caregiving responsibilities. Nevertheless, they struggled to attract women service providers to their platforms, and noted how men were paid more than women for similar types of work on their platform.

“...previously I saw digital platforms as a neutral ground but now I know this platform is not gender neutral. This is an opportunity for me to study how women interact with the platform and to look at gaps - such as the fact that there are fewer women showcasing their talents and they earn less than men for comparable work. Addressing this inequality is a priority for us, as we are committed to enhancing work opportunities for women and ensuring pay equity across the board.”

– CO-FOUNDER, STARTUP, LAGOS

FINDING 3

The collection, analysis, and use of sex-disaggregated data can be improved even among ESOs and startups committed to gender inclusion

A missed opportunity is related to data— both on customers and the workforce. Participating ESOs and startups collect a wide range of data on their workforce and customers, in part because this is inherent to the technology space, yet the data is not always sex-disaggregated nor mined for insights.

“...sex-disaggregated data seems so simple - but why are we not doing it?”

- ESO STAFF, NIGERIA

Table 1. Sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis practices of ESOs

SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	ESOs
Track sex-disaggregated data on the leadership team of the businesses they supports	52%
Track sex-disaggregated data on the end users/clients/beneficiaries of the businesses in its portfolio	29%
Track sex-disaggregated data on the workforce of the businesses they supports/ invests in	29%
Performed a sex-disaggregated or gender analysis of business performance of your portfolio	33%

Table 2. Sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis practices of startups

SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	Startups
Collect sex-disaggregated data on workforce composition	36%
Collect sex-disaggregated data on buyers/clients	29%

Participating ESOs and startups have made efforts to collect sex-disaggregated data, yet they are not strategically leveraging it. For instance, all ESOs record sex-disaggregated data on accelerator programme applicants and acceptance rates. And 62% of ESOs set targets for the number of women-led businesses they strive to support. However, only 33% of ESOs perform a sex-disaggregated analysis of participants' business performance, hindering the ESO's ability to assess the progress of women and men-led businesses. **Finally, ESOs and startups can benefit from tracking sex disaggregated programme outcomes**, such as programme graduation rates for women or the investment levels attained by women-led businesses.

“...we have a minimum target of 45% women-led startups in our accelerator programme, and we also run a programme designed exclusively for women entrepreneurs. Through our strong community connections and market research, we have successfully met and/or exceeded our targets for women’s participation in these two programmes so far. Yet we have not looked into the reason why more women drop out than men, and why men are more likely to access investment”

- ESO STAFF, KENYA

Gender discrimination in the workforce can also take many forms—unequal pay, disparity in promotions, incidents of sexual-harassment, and fewer opportunities for women who are mothers. Sex-disaggregated workforce data can indicate differences in employee satisfaction, and provide signals of larger workplace culture problems that need attention. For example, 69% of startups reported improvements in the workplace in terms of employee retention, satisfaction, mobility and productivity as a result of having workplace policies in place.

Without this analysis to understand the differing needs and preferences of men and women, both ESOs and startups risk overlooking valuable insights on disparities in customer reach, usage and satisfaction, and on the business value of women. For example, only 33% of ESOs use sex-disaggregated data to analyse differences between men and women in terms of impact. Sex-disaggregated data analysis is powerful for informing workforce policies and customer-focused strategies from product development and service enhancements to marketing and outreach strategies, guiding corrective action. This is key for both immediate business outcomes as well as broader growth opportunities that depend on addressing systemic issues.



CASE STUDY

Zuri Health

STARTUP



Zuri Health, a health-tech startup in Nairobi, offers accessible healthcare services through digital and in-person channels. These include the Zuri Health SMS and WhatsApp chatbots for health issues, in-person health camps and clinics, lab and pharmacy services, and other wellness services. Zuri views women as its target customers and the managers and drivers of health for their families.

However, the majority of Zuri Health products tailored to women centre around sexual and reproductive health and are selected by funding partners rather than being informed by customer needs and interests. There is a market opportunity to consider women customers' health needs throughout their life cycle, outside of typical "women's health" concerns.

Using Sex-Disaggregated Data to Guide Business Strategy

Through its chatbots and other services, Zuri Health collects sex-disaggregated data on its customers—data it could potentially use to develop new products. However, it had not yet analysed this data systematically nor conducted other market research necessary to create segmented customer profiles and customer journeys.

“I want to learn more about how to use our data and better understand how to reach customers and product design for women.”

- ZURI HEALTH EMPLOYEE

Through interviews, document reviews, and having Zuri do a gender inclusion self-assessment, **Value for Women saw an opportunity for Zuri to leverage its existing data to inform product design.** Zuri created a Gender Action Plan with three strategies to leverage its existing data in this way:

- Leverage customer data to expand product and service offerings for women.
- Increase customer acquisition by using marketing strategies and channels that resonate with women.
- Seek gender lens funding to support initiatives beyond its core business model by focusing on Zuri Health's impact on women.

With these strategies, Zuri Health anticipates addressing women customers' needs comprehensively, increasing women customer acquisition, and increasing women customer lifetime value.

“What value can we provide more of, especially for opportunities outside of our standard offering? We need to think through women's needs ... and there are wide areas where we can tailor-make products.”

- ZURI HEALTH CO-FOUNDER

FINDING 4

More ESOs and startups are actively trying to reach women as entrepreneurs and clients, but they need to deepen their knowledge and understanding of women customers.

Once ESOs and startups are sex disaggregating their data, as a next step they may need to gather additional information to deepen their understanding of women customers. Despite targeted efforts to reach women, **only 24% of startups conduct market research to understand the unique needs of women or women-led businesses.** Anecdotal evidence indicates it is even less common to develop a value proposition or product or service offering which segments different user groups.

Yet **women's needs are diverse and influenced by individual circumstances and life stages, such as education, career transitions, family planning, and wealth accumulation.**²⁹ Key life events can influence product relevancy and customer satisfaction. This represents an untapped market opportunity to design products with women's needs in mind.

Multiple tools exist to build this understanding and enable such aligned design. **ESOs and startups commonly employ regular online surveys as a preferred method to collect client feedback.** Additionally, multiple startups noted using an online Net Promoter Score (NPS), which measures experience and loyalty following the use of their product or service. These practices are both important and reflect well-established practices for gaining customer insights.

Few complement these online data collection methods with additional mechanisms for listening to clients, particularly to women clients. Qualitative feedback and direct interactions are key for spotting gendered challenges and opportunities because they provide uniquely rich insights that data simply cannot. This is where organisations largely find the kind of specificity they need to improve user experience.

“...we have observed that women in our programmes either give short answers to our online surveys or may not submit any response. So it is not so clear for us to know exactly what is working well for them or what needs to be improved.”

– ESO STAFF, KENYA

Rarely do ESOs or startups engage in regular, structured conversations with women clients, either individually or in groups, to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and needs. Yet if women are dropping out of accelerator programmes at a higher rate than men, for example, an online survey may provide only part of the answer.

Furthermore, there appears to be a gap in tracking how these insights are integrated into product design. This represents a missed opportunity to more effectively design for women, through iterative design informed by customer feedback.

²⁹ See [CGAP research on life stages and data-driven insights](#) (2022) and [UNCDF Inclusive Digital Economies and Gender Equalities Playbook](#) (2021) for further insights on women's life cycle needs.

“...the insights from talking to the women users of our products has given us a rich understanding of their challenges in using our app. We definitely need to incorporate more customer feedback loops in our product design to meet women’s needs.”

- CEO STARTUP, UGANDA

BOX 4

CASE STUDY River Poultry STARTUP



River Poultry, an agri-tech company in Gulu, Uganda, specialises in processed chicken and poultry feed. It works primarily with women poultry farmers and is developing an Internet of Things (IoT) device and app to improve farmers’ practices and profit margins.

To increase revenues after the Covid-19 pandemic forced it to close its slaughterhouse, **River Poultry sought to attract more farmers as users of its services.** But the company struggled with perceptions of poultry farming as a difficult and unprofitable job, and that its IoT device would be too complicated for farmers to use.

So Value for Women conducted diagnostic interviews and a focus group with women farmers who work with River Poultry. Women farmers cited multiple benefits to working with the company. Also through this process, River Poultry identified gaps in its data collection and analysis process. Additionally, it enabled the company to identify usage challenges and opportunities for service improvement.

In response, River Poultry crafted a Gender Action Plan to improve its value proposition for women farmers. This included expanding the company’s training programme. This has exponentially increased the reach of the company’s training, from training 30 farmers up until January 2024, to training 650 farmers in just the following two months. **This increased River Poultry’s sales of chicken feed by 70%.**

By listening to women farmers, understanding the value that its services offer to them and identifying areas for improvement, River Poultry was able to grow despite the inherent challenges of the pandemic.

“We realised our work is more than just the slaughterhouse. ... It’s shifted how we are thinking about our business and strategy. ... We’ve broadened our outreach through our training school, to make more farmers’ lives better.”

- RIVER POULTRY FOUNDER AND CEO

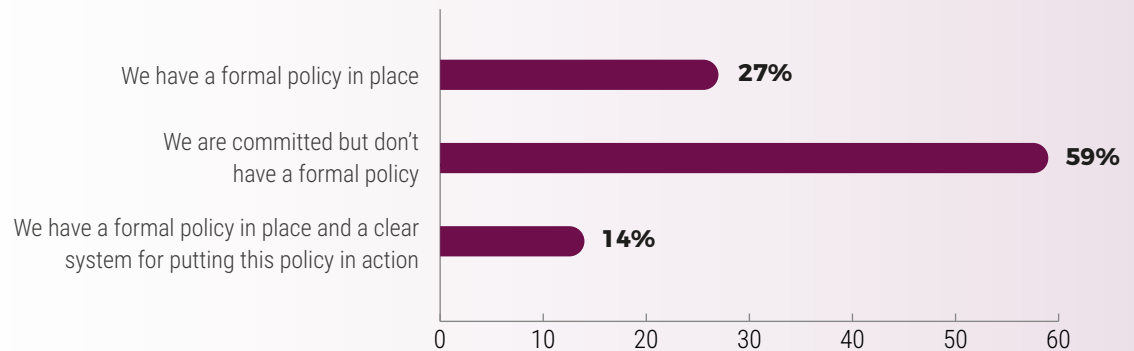
FINDING 5

Measures to increase hiring diversity are more common than measures to support women already on the team

Participating startups already have proactive recruitment efforts, with 60% targeting women applicants through outreach and women’s networks. Most (67%) use standardised processes to review applicants, which is another best practice.

However, challenges persist, with startups and ESOs alike mentioning non-systematised HR practices, particularly around recruitment, promotion, and professional development, especially in tech-focused roles. Multiple startups noted that women are less likely to apply for jobs on digital platforms, and that when they did they tended to earn less than men for ‘like’ work. Startups also highlighted the need to mentor and support women as a strategy to address challenges in moving into more technical roles.

Figure 9. Startups and Wage Equity



Yet looking at measures taken to support women already on the team, such as addressing promotion and salary disparities, the numbers were lower. Only 27% of startups have clear promotion criteria. Fifty percent support women’s career development through targeted training and mentoring opportunities. Fifty-nine percent express a commitment to wage equity however only 14% have formal policies, indicating a gap in policy formalisation. This lack of structured policies for promotion and pay equity at startups may hinder women’s long-term retention and advancement, potentially leading to higher turnover costs and more men in leadership.

“As women in technology, we also want to encourage and support more women to be involved in technology roles. In our startup, the technology department is the only department that is dominated by men. We hope to be able to provide more mentorship opportunities in the future to close these gaps...”

– CO-FOUNDER STARTUP, KENYA

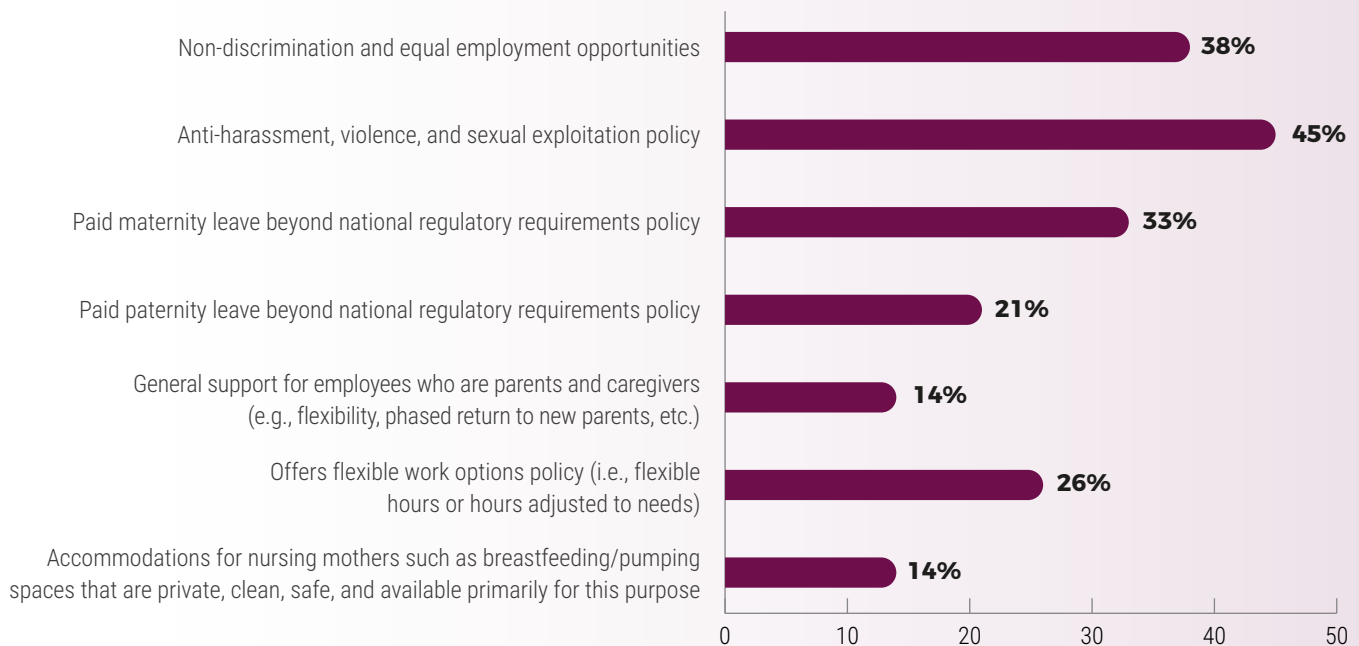
FINDING 6

Many ESOs and startups have legally-mandated risk-mitigating policies, fewer have policies to create an environment for women to thrive

Most participating ESOs (95%) have policies on non-discrimination, equal opportunities, and anti-harassment, either legally mandated or voluntarily adopted to mitigate risk. Startups also have workplace policies, such as anti-harassment (45%), paid paternity leave (21%), and support for parent-caregivers (14%), though at lower rates than ESOs. We recognise that the very nature of early-stage startups, with an emphasis on developing their core products and services, may mean there is less focus on developing human resources.

Both ESOs and startups can build on their existing policy foundation to strengthen adoption of policies that create an environment for women to thrive. **Today, only 14% of ESOs offer paid paternity leave beyond that required nationally and 29% offer paid maternity leave beyond that required.**

Figure 10. ESOs with the following human resource policies in place



Companies offering extended paternity leave often experience positive outcomes like improved retention, enhanced reputation, reduced discrimination, and increased productivity.

CASE STUDY

8thGear Hub & Venture Studio

ESO



8thGear Hub and Venture Studio (8th Gear), a Lagos-based accelerator, aspires to create real change for women in the digital space. It supports startups to digitise non-tech industries such as education, retail, logistics, hospitality and food.

8th Gear has a majority women team and is highly intentional about its commitment to gender inclusion internally too. **Yet it faces challenges due to a lack of women talent in the technology sector.**

“We don’t have a lot of women in the technology space, and when talent is requested, more men respond.”

For a young company, 8thGear has a strong foundation for inclusion laid out in its policies and processes.

The team has been intentional about hiring women, and has young women from Lagos leading across both its technology and programmes teams.

“Our recruitment strategy places a premium on female candidates when we have comparable competence.”

In the face of this challenge, and committed to deepening its approach to gender inclusion, 8thGear partnered with Value for Women to analyse the accelerator’s human resources documents and conduct interviews.

Value for Women then presented 8thGear with a strategy on how to move from *good enough* to an employee lifecycle that fosters both women and men leaders and allows them to genuinely thrive.

This strategy is now defined as part of 8thGear’s Gender Action Plan. In addition to data and programmatic-focused actions, an internal action focuses on standardising the employee lifecycle to mitigate bias and ensure equal treatment for all employees. This includes inclusive job descriptions, diverse recruitment channels, fair evaluations, supportive policies for work-life balance, and more. Through these actions, 8thGear aims to continue to foster a balanced and inclusive workplace.

“We need to have policies in place in case they decide to have a family. So that when they come to work, they can focus on their productivity, with a work-life system.”

This strategy will mirror actions that 8thGear has already begun to take within their programmes, by making programme adjustments to cater to the distinct needs of women as mothers and persons living with a disability.

With a cohesive approach both inside-out, 8thGear hopes to create an environment where women can genuinely thrive and progress, fostering women entrepreneurs and employees as leaders in the digital ecosystem.

FINDING 7

Gaps remain in the availability of gender-specific support and training for even the most interested ESOs and startups

Both ESOs and startups that participated in this research struggled to move from being 'gender-aware' – recognising and understanding the different roles, needs, opportunities and barriers that women and men face – to taking gender-smart action.



This highlights the need for more practical, gender-specific support that effectively supports organisations to integrate gender considerations into their operations. Prior to this GIZ – Value for Women collaboration, most ESOs (64%) hadn't received gender-specific training, while some (32%) had participated in short-term or one-off training; this is critical if ESOs are to have the capacity to serve as a gender inclusivity resource within the entrepreneurial ecosystem and in their work with startups specifically. Today, only 38% of ESOs provide technical assistance to support startups or entrepreneurs in applying a gender lens in their businesses and only 19% offer them training on gender lens investing or gender equality issues.

When we asked participating startups if they had received gender-specific training or support before, fewer than half (48%) had received a brief training and only 5% had received longer-term assistance.

Research has shown that accessible, longer-term technical assistance could bridge the gap between awareness and action, enhancing performance and competitiveness, fostering inclusivity, and contributing to the broader goals of social responsibility and sustainable development.³⁰

“...we have received gender training previously, but this experience has been very different and has captured a lot of scope, and many things I had not envisioned. This helps us see how we can do more and nail things down for future action. Everything is now very clear, and we know what our next steps should be.”

– CO-FOUNDER STARTUP, KENYA

30 OECD (2018) Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Include, Upskill, Innovate, available [here](#)

The positive business results ESOs and startups saw from implementing gender strategies

The participating ESOs and technology startups that implemented gender-inclusive strategies have already observed tangible benefits.³¹ Read on for the business results seen from each type of strategy:



- **GENDER-INCLUSIVE HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES: 69% of surveyed startups experienced improvements after adopting gender-inclusive HR policies.** Out of these startups, 93% reported an increase in employee productivity, 72% reported an increase in employee satisfaction, 55% reported an increase in employee retention, and 24% reported an increase in employee mobility/promotion.



- **GENDER-INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PRACTICES: 60% of surveyed startups observed improvements after implementing gender-inclusive recruitment and hiring practices** (e.g. using targeted outreach and networks to increase the number of women job applicants, using a standardised process to review applicants, and having diverse hiring committees). These improvements included increased satisfaction, retention, productivity and improvements in the mobility/promotion of women employees.



- **GENDER-INCLUSIVE MARKET AND PRODUCT DESIGN: Those startups that regularly consult women or women-led businesses to improve the design of products and services all reported positive outcomes**, including increased sales revenue and profit, increased brand recognition, increased client satisfaction and retention, and increased employee satisfaction and retention. Furthermore, applying a gender lens to marketing strategies has been linked with positive business outcomes. 80% of startups that tailored their marketing strategies to women or women-led businesses saw positive business outcomes, such as increased sales revenue, increased profit, brand recognition, and client satisfaction.



- **DATA ANALYSIS AND FEEDBACK:** Enhanced sex-disaggregated data analysis and feedback mechanisms provided ESOs with insights into programme completion rates and barriers to access to credit for women entrepreneurs, and provided startups with insights into client satisfaction and pay equity. Improved employee feedback mechanisms led to better understanding of employee experiences for both ESOs and startups.³² **For one startup, as a result of implementing iterative feedback mechanisms it was able to improve the design of its products and services, subsequently seeing a 74% increase in its monthly sales.**

³¹ These results were self-reported by ESOs and startups during the sustainability workshops held in March 2024 and through the Gender Smart Nexus self-assessment completed between October and December 2023.

³² This finding was observed during in-person work with ESOs and Startups and validated in conversations with staff.



ESOs also identified additional results they expect to see in the medium term. For example, as a result of improving their programme design, **ESOs expect to see improved retention and satisfaction of women entrepreneurs in their accelerator programmes and that participating women entrepreneurs have greater access to finance.** Additionally, the investment fund of one ESO expects to **attract additional gender lens investors to its fund**, thanks to its updated gender-lens investment strategy and explicit gender targets that make clear the gender impact it expects to achieve across the portfolio.

Finally, through this programme, ESOs and startups were incentivised to incorporate organisational change through learning webinars, develop gender roadmaps and action plans, and implement these gender inclusion strategies with technical assistance. The result is that today, tangible **organisational change has occurred.** Participating ESOs and startups have a better understanding of the business case for gender inclusion and why a gender lens is important in their organisation, and they also have defined plans to transition from intention to action to create more inclusive organisations, products, and services.

These findings are clear: gender-inclusive practices contribute to organisational change and enhanced business outcomes.

“...I now understand why applying a gender lens to our work is so important, and how it can help us to improve our product and service design. Ultimately, this will also help us to be sustainable.”

– CO-FOUNDER STARTUP, KENYA



Recommendations for the way forward

This report has shown that gender-intentional ESOs and technology startups in Africa have made important progress and also have considerable room to grow their gender inclusion action. From this, we can also get a sense of how extensive the sector's untapped potential is in the region to grow its gender inclusion action. The report also illustrated the multitude of ways in which gender inclusion can be a performance strategy for startups to meet diverse business priorities, based on data specific to this sector and region. Based on these insights, we share the following recommendations for ESOs and tech startups in Africa to move from intention to action, and for donors seeking to increase gender inclusion in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Africa.

Recommendations for technology startups



Tech startups in Africa can move from intention to action for improved gender inclusion in their businesses by implementing the following strategies:

ESTABLISH A CLEAR GENDER COMMITMENT: First and foremost, set an intention to make change happen. Applying a gender lens requires commitment and intentionality. While such a statement in and of itself will not directly lead to more gender-inclusive practices, it can be a powerful tool for a business to clearly articulate to their employees and clients their intention to contribute to gender inclusion through their business activities. For startups at earlier stages in their business model, a gender commitment may help them to attract seed or venture capital and communicate their value proposition. This can also help attract new women clients, who feel valued by these measures, and investors seeking opportunities to support startups that use gender inclusion as a performance strategy.



COMPLETE A GENDER SELF-ASSESSMENT TO IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES: Startups can benefit by highlighting to where they have and have not taken gendered differences into account. This process will help startups recognise where they have already considered gender differences and where they need to adopt new strategies to foster growth and inclusivity as they grow and establish their business.

Startups should conduct a gender-focused self-assessment to pinpoint their strengths and areas for improvement regarding gender inclusion. This process will help them recognise where they've already considered gender differences and where they need to adopt new strategies to foster growth and inclusivity as they scale their business.

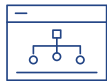


IMPLEMENT GENDER-INCLUSIVE HR POLICIES AND PRACTICES: Tech startups, often challenged to recruit women for technical roles, should foster an inclusive workplace culture that actively seeks to attract and retain talent from STEM backgrounds. Train all employees on gender sensitivity and bias awareness. Commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion at every company level, ensuring each team member feels valued and supported. Regularly update HR policies to enhance gender inclusivity, particularly by revising recruitment strategies to eliminate bias and appeal to women in tech, addressing wage gaps, offering flexible schedules, and providing robust training on gender equality. These measures will not only improve the workplace environment but also help bridge the gender gap in technical roles within the tech sector.



COLLECT AND ANALYSE SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA: Collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data to track progress on gender inclusion and identify areas for improvement. This may involve conducting regular employee surveys, analysing workforce demographics, and monitoring key performance indicators related to gender diversity and inclusion. Such sex-disaggregated data collection will enable startups to:

- Identify gendered differences and take action to determine appropriate strategies to move forward
- Develop sex-disaggregated targets for increasing women in leadership or in the workforce



UNDERSTAND AND TARGET WOMEN CUSTOMERS: Women as a customer segment can find themselves in businesses' blind spots. Yet research has shown that customer centricity can greatly contribute to businesses' outperforming their peers.³³ Startups need to be intentional to ensure women benefit from technology advancements and should use sex-disaggregated data to identify needs and preferences of women customers. Once data is sex-disaggregated, then startups can build on this data through the following suggestions:

- **Diversity feedback channels:** Augment online surveys and other quantitative data collection tools with qualitative tools, such as focus groups, interviews, customer journey mapping and user experience testing to uncover unique needs, cultural nuances and barriers women face in accessing technology. These approaches help identify differences in experiences and pain points between men and women, and provide richer insights.
- **Develop a systematic process to integrate feedback:** Ensure that feedback is methodically collected and a process is in place to transform insights into actionable changes that reflect the customer's needs and preferences.
- **Use these insights to develop tailored value propositions** that resonate with women across different stages of their lives.
- Ensure **both women and men** are involved in teams conducting market research and designing products.

³³ CGAP. "Why Go Customer Centric?". Available [here](#)

- **Ensure all market research is done in a sex-disaggregated manner:** Only through sex-disaggregated data collection and market research can startups accurately identify and understand differences in the needs, preferences and behaviours of men and women. These insights can reveal market gaps and opportunities. Startups who understand and leverage these nuances in gender-specific research can create more effective product designs, marketing strategies and encourage innovation through the creation of products that cater specifically to women customers.



BUILD TEAM CAPABILITIES: Invest in training and development for your team to learn about why and how to advance gender inclusion in practice. This includes not just the human resources team, but also those working on product development, marketing, customer service and leadership. Tailor these training programmes to reflect the realities of African markets.



RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY ROLES: Create opportunities for women through exposing them to diverse job roles. Challenge stereotypes, provide training and mentorship, and help women to see the opportunities in technology roles. Additionally, provide access to flexible training programmes to further facilitate women's entry, retention and progression in the workplace.

Recommendations for Entrepreneurial Support Organisations



ESOs can support gender inclusion within their workplaces and within their work with startups through the following actions:

START WITH AN ORGANISATIONAL GENDER SELF-ASSESSMENT TO HIGHLIGHT STRENGTHS, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES: Whether an ESO is advanced in its gender inclusion efforts or just beginning, conducting a self-assessment using tools like the Gender Smart Nexus or similar resources can serve as an invaluable first step. These assessments not only offer insights into an organisation's current state but also serve as a benchmark for comparison with peers, and provide an objective analysis, paving the way for strategic planning and actionable next steps. In addition, ESOs can also encourage the startups they work with to do the same, in order to highlight where they have or have not taken gender differences into account, and to identify strategies that can be quick wins going forward, to demonstrate feasibility, build momentum and secure buyin from leadership and employees.



DEVELOP A GENDER-INCLUSIVE MISSION AND STRATEGY: Start by developing a clear mission and strategy for promoting gender inclusion within the organisation. This may involve setting goals, targets, and key performance indicators (KPIs) related to gender diversity and inclusion, as well as integrating gender considerations into the organisation's overall mission and objectives. For example:

- ESOs can set specific targets for the percentage of women in technical positions, leadership or on the boards of the startups they support, as well as within their own teams.
- Track and aim to increase the percentage of women-led startups that participate in acceleration programmes, and establish targets for the participation of women entrepreneurs in all training sessions and networking events

“Our fund faces a significant challenge in identifying women-led enterprises that align with our impact investment thesis. Despite our commitment to supporting women-led startups, we’ve observed a notable reluctance amongst these businesses towards equity financing. As a result of the gender lens TA, we are planning to hold workshops with women startups to provide information on different types of financing and their pros and cons, and we hope to find other investors for our fund who are willing to consider blended finance options in line with the preferences of women-led ventures, leading to lower gender disparities.”

– ESO EMPLOYEES, KENYA

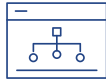
- Establish KPIs for the amount of funding directed specifically toward startups with women founders or those developing gender-inclusive technologies
- Regularly survey women participants to assess their satisfaction with the support provided and the impact on their business growth, and use these insights to adjust and develop services that better meet the needs of women entrepreneurs
- Track compliance with non-discrimination policies within the startups you support and provide technical support where gaps in policies exist
- Build capacity for gender inclusion by offering training and education programmes – to both ESO staff and the startups supported – on gender sensitivity, unconscious bias, and inclusive practices.



ENCOURAGE THE COLLECTION AND USE OF SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA, AND

MONITOR PROGRESS: Collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data to track progress on gender inclusion internally and with startups supported and identify areas for improvement. Given that technology startups often generate large amounts of data, this may include:

- Make resources available to startups to update their data systems and processes, with appropriate regard for privacy. This may involve helping them to design their data collection systems, building staff capacity on data collection and analysis, providing templates or frameworks for data collection, selecting software, or helping them identify key indicators to track.
- Leverage mobile technology, given the high penetration of mobile technology in Africa, and support startups to develop mobile-based tools for data collection, customer feedback and gender impact assessments.
- Support startups to move from collection of sex-disaggregated data to the analysis of gendered differences. This may include identification of differences in reach among women and men, identifying gender differences in platform use, to the identification of gendered trends and patterns.
- Conduct regular surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather feedback and insights on both gender-related issues within the organisation, as well as research to understand the barriers and opportunities facing women entrepreneurs and track changes over time.



ENGAGE AND COLLABORATE WITH WOMEN-FOCUSED ORGANISATIONS: Collaborate with women-focused organisations, networks, and initiatives to leverage their expertise and resources in promoting gender inclusion. This may involve partnering with African women's business associations, gender-focused NGOs, and women-led startups to co-create programmes and initiatives that address the specific needs of women entrepreneurs.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE AND SHARE BEST PRACTICES: Lead by example and share best practices in gender inclusion with other ESOs and stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This may involve showcasing successful gender-inclusive programmes and initiatives, challenging gender stereotypes and biases, highlighting case studies of women entrepreneurs, and sharing lessons learned from the ESO's own experiences.

Rigorous and comprehensive tracking mechanisms are the only way for an ESO to fully understand women's needs and ensure that its commitment to gender inclusion translates into substantial economic opportunities and growth for women-led businesses.

Recommendations for funders and development organisations



Funders and development organisations can incentivise startups and ESOs to access and adopt gender inclusion practices through a variety of strategies, which are outlined below. In addition, these types of strategies can have a ripple effect and contribute to a more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

FINANCIALLY SUPPORT GENDER-FOCUSED INITIATIVES: Donors can allocate funding specifically for gender-inclusive initiatives and provide resources to support ESOs and startups in implementing gender equality strategies. This could include:

- Support for conducting gender assessments, developing gender inclusive HR policies, or integrating gender considerations into product and service design. By financially supporting these initiatives, donors can lower the barriers to entry for ESOs and startups that may have limited resources to invest in these areas.
- Focus on sector-specific needs where technology startups are prominent in Africa, such as fintech, agritech and health tech. Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities in these sectors can lead to more effective and targeted interventions.



PROVIDE CAPACITY BUILDING: Donors can offer training and assistance to help ESOs and startups understand the importance of gender inclusion and provide tangible opportunities to begin to move intention to action. This can include workshops, webinars, access to gender expertise who specialise in gender assessments and support in implementing gender inclusion strategies. Make available tools of particular importance to the technology ecosystem, such as data collection and analysis tools for digital platforms, customer journey mapping, SMS and online surveys, and user experience testing that include a gender perspective, and make it easier for ESOs and startups to integrate gender considerations into their operations and products.

By building capacity and access to different entry points depending on where ESOs and startups are in their gender inclusion journey, donors help ensure that ESOs and startups not only start but also sustain their gender inclusion efforts.



SET CLEAR GENDER INCLUSION CRITERIA: Donors can set clear expectations and targets for gender inclusion within their funding criteria and agreements with ESOs and startups to encourage more systemic changes or to require that gender inclusion metrics improve over time as a condition of funding. This may include requiring enterprises to develop gender action plans and gender equality policies, conduct gender impact assessments, and report on progress towards gender-related goals and targets. Donors can stipulate that continued financial support is dependent on meeting these gender inclusion benchmarks, encouraging ESOs and startups to prioritise these initiatives.



RECOGNITION AND AWARDS: Donors can establish awards or recognition programmes that highlight and reward ESOs and startups that are making progress in their gender inclusion efforts. This not only provides an incentive to strive for gender inclusivity but also raises the profile of those who are leading in this area, setting them up as examples for others in their industry.



CREATE AND FACILITATE NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS: In light of ESOs' and startups' need for greater access to knowledge on "how" to move from intention to action, donors can facilitate collaborations that do this. These may be between startups, ESOs, African expert civil society organisations, and/or government agencies, and targeted to forming communities of practice for gender-related knowledge-sharing, networking, and collaborations between those with deep insights into the gender dynamics of the region..



MONITOR AND EVALUATE IMPACT: Donors can monitor and evaluate the impact of their investments and interventions on gender inclusion to ensure accountability and transparency. This may involve collecting gender-disaggregated data, conducting gender impact assessments, and evaluating the effectiveness of gender-related initiatives in achieving their intended outcomes. At a minimum, donors can require the collection and sex disaggregation of data. Donors can also use the lessons learned to publish examples and case studies and data on gender gaps and missed opportunities as an opportunity to advance local examples on the business case for gender inclusion.

Overall, whilst progress has been made in promoting gender inclusion in the African technology and digital innovation ecosystem, significant challenges remain. These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between the intention and actual practice of gender inclusion, ensuring that both ESOs and startups not only recognise the importance of gender diversity but also actively implement strategies to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for women in the African technology and digital innovation ecosystem.

Annex A: Methodology

This report focuses on gender-inclusive practices specifically in ESOs and startups in the technology sector in Africa. The data collected from this report includes the self-reported gender diagnostic data collected from 21 ESOs and 42 technology startups through the Gender Smart Nexus platform, a proprietary tool available for free to enterprises, investors, financial institutions and enterprise support organisations.

These ESOs and startups are dispersed in 17 countries throughout Africa, with the majority in East Africa. Approximately ~95% of ESOs and ~64% of startups identify as micro and small enterprises, with fewer than 50 employees. ESOs (~76%) primarily support between 16-100 startups per year whilst a few (~4.8%) support more than 200 startups per year. In this sample, most startups are at the venture stage (38%), having established operations, possibly generating revenue, or are at the seed/startup phase (36%), with a concept yet to be fully operational. A comprehensive demographic breakdown is available in Annex A.

The report also draws on qualitative data collected throughout the implementation of this project between November 2024 and March 2024. It includes participants' observations and feedback collected by the Value for Women team through an in-person 3-day gender inclusion bootcamp with 25 ESOs (held in Nairobi in November 2023). Additionally, the Value for Women team has consolidated insights from interviews, observations, and feedback collected during in-person field visits, training sessions, and document reviews conducted as part of the deep dive technical assistance provided to 6 selected organisations (3 ESOs and 3 startups) over the programme period. The insights derived from these interviews are mentioned throughout the brief to provide context and further insight into findings from the quantitative analysis.

About Gender Smart Nexus

What is it? The Gender Smart Nexus is an online platform that helps enterprises, investors, financial institutions, and enterprise support organisations evaluate their policies and practices regarding their approach to women's inclusion. Nexus looks at potential changes within the organisation, with regard to the products and services it offers and the commercial or financial relationships it seeks to establish.



What can it do? Users have access to a series of assessment tools that simplify their gender evaluation processes. Then, Nexus provides users with ready access to a tailored report with suggested actions they can take to move their organisation forward in its gender journey. The ability to re-take self-evaluations enables organisations to assess their progress over time. Additionally, investors and entrepreneur support organisations can measure how enterprises receiving their support are progressing on adopting gender-forward business practices, benchmark organisations against each other, and measure employee satisfaction and organisational culture through a gender lens.

Is it free? Because Value for Women is committed to information transparency and access to data to move the field forward, we built Nexus as a free, public good. Most of the functionalities are available to any organisation interested in assessing its gender inclusion strengths and weaknesses.

How to join? To learn more about the Gender Smart Nexus and how to sign up, follow this link: www.v4w.org/gender-smart-nexus

Enterprises in our sample demonstrate progress in their gender inclusion journey, with a high alignment with the 2X Criteria exceeding industry norms and a commitment to gender inclusion.

High alignment with the 2X Challenge Criteria

All ESOs and startups in our sample are 2x aligned, meaning that they meet at least one of the [2X Criteria](#).³⁴ This is significantly higher than industry norms. Specifically, our sample shows 48% of ESOs and 60% of startups have more than 51% women in ownership and high rates of women in senior management, starkly contrasting with the broader African technology sector, where only approximately 14% of technology startups are founded by women.³⁵ Globally, women account for approximately 28.2% of all managerial positions across all sectors.³⁶

Notably, the presence of at least one woman founder or partner in the majority of these enterprises, along with a significant representation of women in leadership positions - well beyond the 2X 30% threshold - underscores a commitment towards enhanced gender inclusion in our cohort. This is especially noteworthy, given these enterprises identify as operating in the technology sector. This pattern suggests that **this sample of organisations' marked interest in gender inclusion is likely driven by the transformative influence of women in foundational and executive roles**, and their results may not be easily compared to the 'average' ESO or startup.

Limitations of this study

The results on business and social outcomes are encouraging and are an important indication of the state of the sector. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Nexus only presents questions about outcomes to those respondents who have carried out gender-inclusive practices in each business area assessed, which results in smaller sizes. This data represents the state of practice at the moment of measurement and is not longitudinal data. The data included in this report draws specifically from the 63 enterprises for which data was submitted between October 2023 and December 2024. As such, the findings presented in this report need further corroboration and can be improved with longitudinal data. Based on our research showing that few enterprises are using sex-disaggregated statistics for reflection and strategic planning purposes, our operating assumption is that the enterprises indicated they didn't know or aren't aware of the results because they failed to track the outcomes of gender actions. Future Value for Women research efforts will break down this data point to better understand the explanatory factors behind it.

Finally, it is worth noting that this project garnered substantial interest from women-led startups and ESOs already advancing in gender equality, with all selected participants demonstrating a keen interest in gender inclusion, aligned with the programme's objectives. This situation suggests a potential 'self-selection bias' within our data, stemming from a participant pool of ESOs and startups exhibiting stronger gender inclusion outcomes than the wider population. Such a bias could occur because programmes focusing on gender inclusion naturally appeal more to women-led startups or those with an existing commitment to gender inclusion, perceiving the programme as more relevant to their interests. Consequently, the participants in the programme may not fully represent the broader business community, instead reflecting entities with an inherent interest in or commitment to addressing gender issues.

34 The new 2X criteria recently announced in March 2024 are not considered.

35 Startup Genome survey (2023) [Only 14% of African technology startup founders are women; here are the reasons and possible remedies](#).

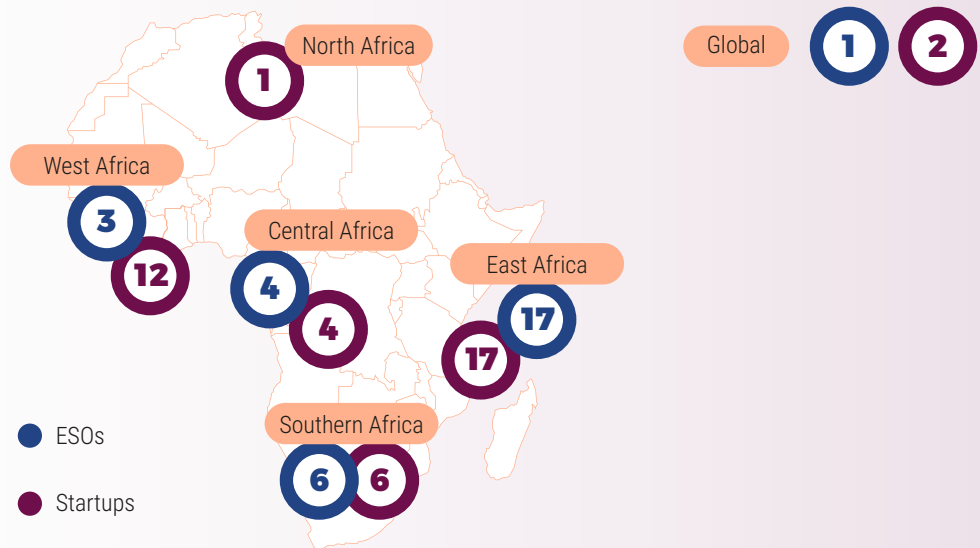
36 Statista (2024) ["Proportion of Women in Managerial Positions Worldwide 1991-2021"](#). Accessed 2/02/2024.

Annex B: Sample demographics

The data below includes information from 21 ESOs and 42 technology startups that completed the Gender Smart Nexus self-assessment survey between October and December 2023.

17 countries across Africa are represented in this sample.

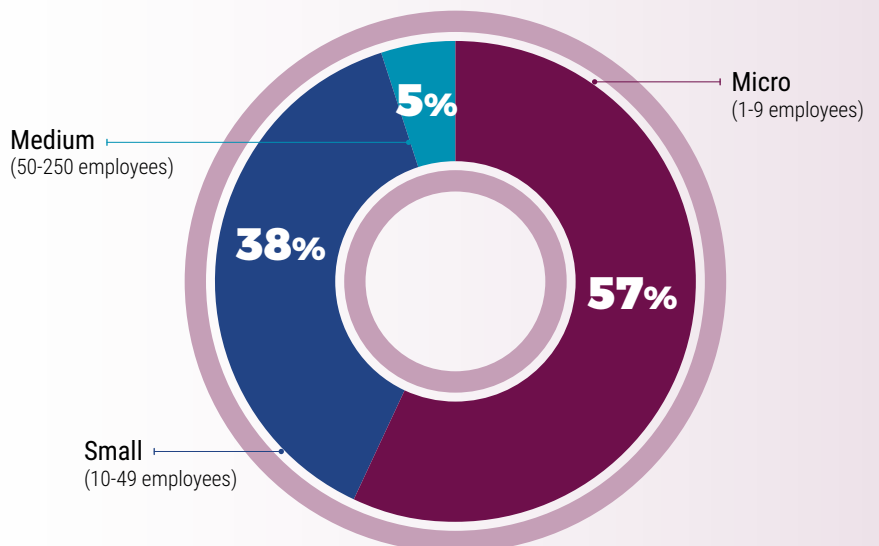
Figure 11. Countries in Africa who are represented in the survey results



ESOs

The majority of organisations (~95%) in this sample are micro and small enterprises, having less than 50 employees.

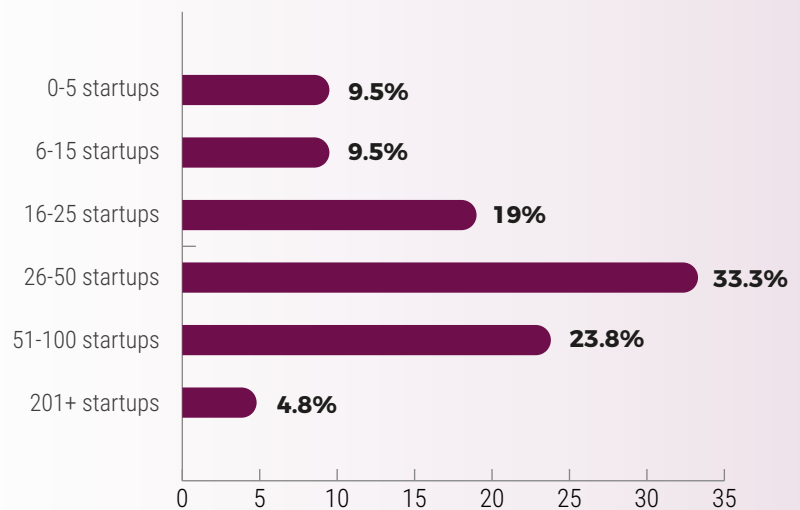
Figure 12. Average size of ESOs in the sample





Most ESOs (~76%) provide entrepreneurial support to between 16 and 100 businesses, whilst 4.8% of ESOs have supported more than 200 businesses in the past 12 months.

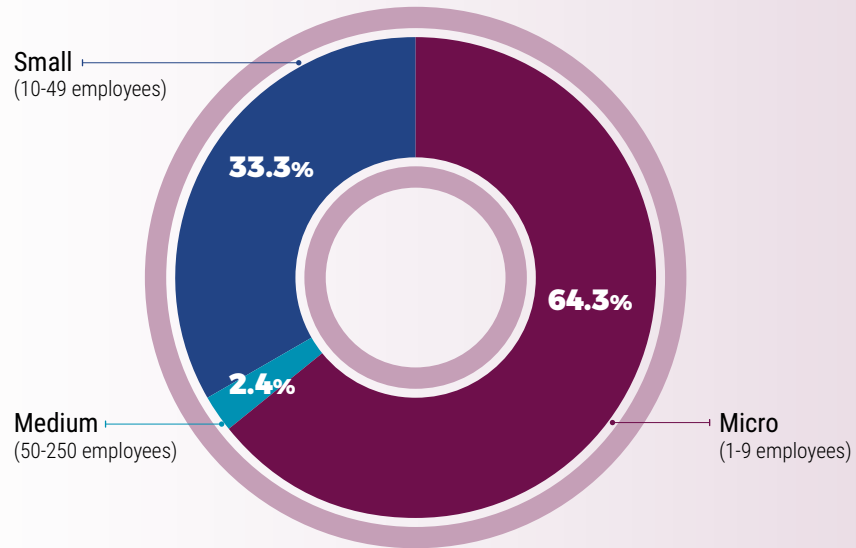
Figure 13. Number of startups supported by ESOs



Technology startups

Most technology startups (~64%) were micro to small enterprises, employing fewer than 50 people.

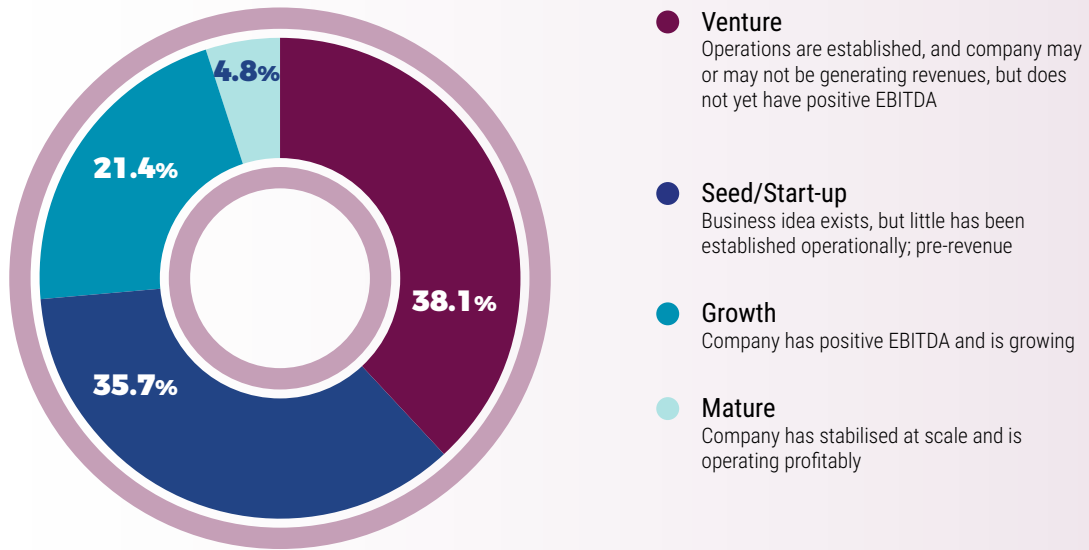
Figure 14. Size of startups in the survey



Most startups in this sample were either at the venture stage (38.1%) with established operations that may be generating revenue or at the seed/startup stage (35.7%) with a business idea that still needs to be fully operational. whilst uncommon to have startups identified as in the growth or mature stage, the term 'startup' can be interpreted differently across various contexts, and companies may self-identify as a startup until they reach a certain revenue threshold, employee count or operational scale. Startups in the technology sector may also have longer maturation cycles due to the complexity of product development, regulatory approvals or market penetration challenges. One startup described how their business model suffered during the COVID-19 period, resulting in a return to 'startup mode' despite having been in operation for many years. These and other factors create diverse trajectories for startups as they develop and mature.



Figure 15. Stage of startups in the sample



The startups in the sample self-identify as digital, technology or innovation startups. They span a diverse range of industry sectors. Most operate in education, healthcare, agribusiness, and food (~77%).

Figure 16. Sector of startups in the sample

