



Equity Lens Founder's Guide

**A guide for women founders in
Asia and the Pacific on navigating
gender bias in the fundraising
process**

JULY 2024



About ESCAP



*The shaded areas of the map indicate ESCAP members and associate members.**

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is the most inclusive intergovernmental platform in the Asia-Pacific region. The Commission promotes cooperation among its 53 member States and 9 associate members in pursuit of solutions to sustainable development challenges. ESCAP is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

The ESCAP secretariat supports inclusive, resilient and sustainable development in the region by generating action-oriented knowledge, and by providing technical assistance and capacity-building services in support of national development objectives, regional agreements and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

* The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Table of Contents

Page

iv	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	_____
v	GLOSSARY OF TERMS	_____
1	INTRODUCTION	_____
	2	— What is gender bias?
	4	— What this guide covers
6	PREPARING FOR INVESTMENT	_____
10	IDENTIFYING INVESTORS	_____
15	PITCHING FOR INVESTMENT	_____
19	CONCLUSION	_____

Disclaimer:

The case studies included in this toolkit are drawn from publicly available sources and our primary research, to showcase best practices and inspire action. We do not endorse any other activities or practices of the companies featured.

Acknowledgements

This guide was prepared through the collaborative efforts of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and Value for Women Ltd under the “Catalyzing Women’s Entrepreneurship” programme, funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.

The team at United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok included:

- **Rupa Chanda**, Director of Trade, Investment and Innovation Division (TIID)
- **Jonathan Wong**, Chief of Innovation, Enterprise and Investment, TIID
- **Elena Mayer-Besting**, Programme Management Officer, TIID
- **Sara Diaz**, Gender and Coordination Consultant, TIID

Members of the core research and drafting team included:

Authors: Jennifer Linares, Alakshi Tomar, Bernice Nyoike, Trina Roy, Luis Marquez

Editor: Shoshana Grossman-Crist | **Design:** Gerardo Mejia

The study could not have been completed without the contributions and valuable inputs of Village Capital, and other partners including Ruvanara Tillekeratne, Senior Program Manager at Hatch Works Pvt Ltd (Sri Lanka), Ma Rowena L. Reyes, Director at Sweef Capital Management Pte Ltd, and Hien Tu, CEO of WISE (Viet Nam).

Glossary of Terms

SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
VfW	Value for Women
WLB	Women-Led Business
CCA	Comparable Company Analysis
DCF	Discounted Cash Flow
EO	Entrepreneurs Organisation
ESG	Environmental, Social, Governance
STEM	Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics
USP	Unique Selling Point
VC	Venture Capital
PE	Private Equity
WLB	Women-led Businesses



Introduction



In Asia and the Pacific, the gender gap in access to venture capital (VC) is significant. **In 2021, only 1.8% of VC funding went to women-only startup founding teams,** while 89.5% of VC funding went to startups with only men on the founding team and 8.6% to startups with mixed-gender founding teams.¹

This disparity is largely due to gender bias in investors' organisational policies and practices. Building on the extensive experience of Value for Women and ESCAP in this sphere, it is clear that systemic change requires "changing the institution², not the women." However, we know that changing the institutions and systems takes more time and in the meantime, women founders face a significant gender finance gap in raising capital for their businesses.

This guide aims to support and empower women startup founders in the Asia-Pacific region to navigate inherent gender biases during three stages of the fundraising process:

```
graph LR; 1[1] --- 2[2] --- 3[3];
```

1 PREPARING FOR INVESTMENT 2 IDENTIFYING INVESTORS 3 PITCHING FOR INVESTMENT

It highlights the gender biases that women founders currently face and then provides insights and recommendations for how to navigate and work around them. This Guide is here to help women startup founders counter the conscious and unconscious biases present throughout the fundraising process and unlock the capital they deserve, while the broader systemic changes continue.

What is gender bias?

GENDER BIAS

Have you ever felt like you're asked different questions than men during pitch competitions? Or felt overlooked despite having a strong business plan? It's highly likely that these things are actually happening to you. These are examples of potential gender bias at play.

Gender bias refers to systematic, often unconscious prejudice based on gender. In this Guide, we focus on the prejudice against women founders and/or women-led businesses during fundraising.

Why should you care?



Fundraising is challenging for all founders, but it's even harder for women.³ And even when women founders muster the courage to face the 'shark tank' experience, the numbers aren't encouraging.

- When women founders pitch their companies to VCs, they are less likely to secure funding than men with similar backgrounds and companies.^{4,5}
- **Even when presenting the same pitches as women, men founders are more successful and preferred by investors.⁶**
- Pitches presented by men are seen to be more persuasive, fact-based, and logical.⁷
- Companies founded or co-founded by women, on average, receive less than half the investment that is awarded to **companies founded or co-founded by men.⁸**



Early-stage firms that can access capital are able to grow 30% faster⁹ but across the Asia-Pacific region, women founders face significant barriers in setting up their businesses and securing venture capital.

- As of 2023, only **5.7% of startups in the Asia-Pacific region were founded by women**, a percentage that has remained unchanged over the past five years¹⁰.
- **In 2021, only 1.8% of VC funding went to women-only startup founding teams** while 89.5% of VC funding went to startups with only men on the founding team, and 8.6% to startups with mixed-gender founding teams, in Asia.¹¹
- **In emerging markets, only 7% of total VC and PE funding goes to WLBs.¹²** Furthermore, WLBs in emerging markets receive only 65% of the median funding that men-led businesses get.

Who is this guide for?

1)

Existing or aspiring women startup founders in the Asia-Pacific region, aiming to raise investments and navigate and overcome potential gender bias throughout the fundraising journey.

2)

Entrepreneur support organisations and anyone working with women startup founders, looking to support women in navigating the fundraising process and overcoming gender biases.

NOTE:

For the purposes of this Guide, our focus is on providing useful inputs for countering bias during fundraising, with an emphasis on women founders. However, this tool is also designed to be valuable for founders, investors, and employees of entrepreneur support organisations across all genders, including men, women, individuals identifying with other genders, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.



© cuongnguyen / Freepik

What does this guide cover?

This guide is structured to help you navigate **three key stages** in the fundraising process where gender bias could show up:



1 Preparing for Investment:

Learn how to gather the knowledge and materials needed to approach investors confidently.

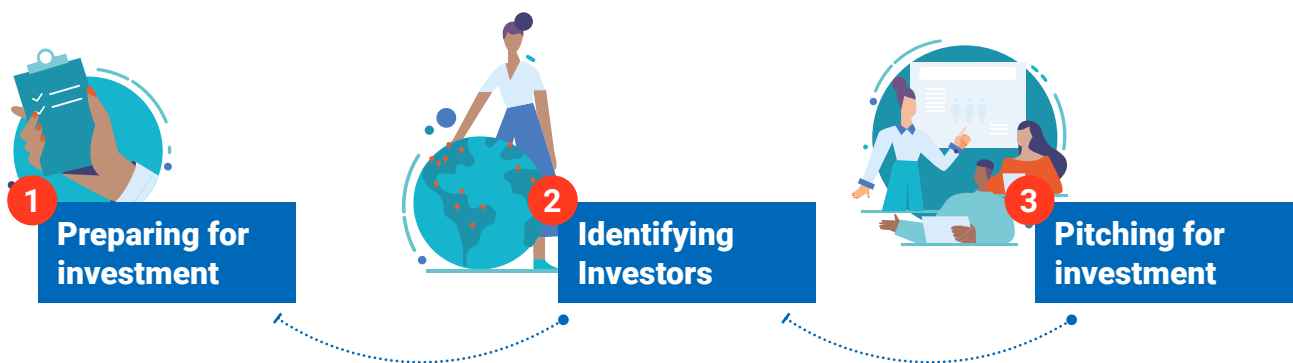
2 Identifying Investors:

Strategically find and target investors who align with the founders' vision and values.

3 Pitching for Investment:

Craft and deliver a persuasive presentation, supported by solid data, to secure funding.

Each stage includes practical, easy-to-implement strategies. Keep in mind that these stages are not rigid or mutually exclusive; they are designed to inspire action. Insights and best practices may overlap across different stages of your fundraising journey.



Methodology

This Guide was developed by speaking with investors, founders, and researchers across the Asia-Pacific region, specifically in Viet Nam and Sri Lanka, to gather detailed insights from a diverse range of stakeholders. By conducting both online and in-person interviews, we were able to collect valuable perspectives directly from individuals with relevant expertise and experience in raising funds. Additionally, we presented our initial findings at the UN ESCAP Feminist Finance Forum 2024, where we held discussions with participants, including investors and founders, to gather feedback and ensure our results reflected the broader community's perspectives. Alongside these efforts, we reviewed existing literature such as academic articles, industry reports, and case studies to build a strong foundation for this guide.



Preparing for investment

© Pressphoto / Freepik

What is preparing for investment?

Preparing for investment includes several things a founder needs to do before approaching an investor. Such as: craft a compelling narrative to highlight business strengths and unique value proposition, ensure you have the necessary documents (pitch deck, financial projections, compliance documents, etc.) to demonstrate competence, and practise assertive communication to confidently navigate investor engagement. Simply put, it means doing your homework and having clarity on your ask and needs.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Women-led businesses often get smaller investments and lower valuations.

Women-only founded teams are often undervalued by about 25% compared to startups with men-only founders.¹³ Part of this undervaluation stems from knowledge gaps and timing, while part of it stems from the gender-biased questions investors may ask. Investors we spoke with mentioned that first-time founders need to bridge the “knowledge gap about the various valuation mechanisms.”¹⁴ Another aspect highlighted by investors was the timing of raising investments– some women-led businesses (WLBs) fundraise when they are “too small and informal to absorb”¹⁵ investment.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

USE DATA TO UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE YOUR BUSINESS VALUE AND ASK

- ★ Confidently assert your startup's value. Have a clear, data-backed valuation to counter any bias-driven underestimation. Emphasise key metrics such as **revenue growth, customer acquisition rates, and profitability**.



To calculate your startup's valuation, use methods like Comparable Company Analysis (CCA), Discounted Cash Flow (DCF), etc. Tools like Equidam¹⁶, BizEquity¹⁷, and PitchBook¹⁸ can help streamline this process by providing comprehensive valuation analyses.

- ★ Be clear about your **fundraising ask**: amount of capital required, utilisation plan, and repayment mechanism.
- ★ While professional valuation services are available, we recommend you **lead the valuation and financial modelling process**. The strategy and data have to come from YOU as the founder and this will give you an in-depth understanding of your startup's financial status and growth plans. Your financial and growth model will help you to identify **when the right time to raise capital is**.
- ★ Start creating a data room: Ensure your financials (invoices, proof of business etc.), compliance documents, and business systems are in impeccable order. Investors love data and it shows you mean business. Provide **detailed, realistic financial projections** that are supported by historical data and market trends. Include different scenarios to show that you've considered various outcomes and are prepared for potential challenges.

THINK OF THE AUDIENCE - THE INVESTOR!

- ★ Build an **in-depth understanding of every investor** you pitch to; research their interests and past investments, and highlight how your business aligns with their portfolio and values. This will help you customise your pitch for each investor.
- ★ Build your **knowledge base about different funding mechanisms** through online courses or mentors. It's crucial to understand which funding options are best for your business and find investors who align with your needs.



Explore equity financing structures like Y Combinator SAFE (simple agreement for future equity)¹⁹, Calm Company Fund's SEAL (shared earnings agreement),²⁰ innovative debt-financing mechanisms like IIX's Orange Bond Initiative²¹ and many more, based on the type of funding you are looking for.

SHOW A STRONG UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR MARKET AND COMPETITORS.

- ★ Prepare thorough **market research** to validate your business model and market potential. Include data on market size, growth projections, and customer demand. This helps to mitigate biases by demonstrating a solid understanding of your market.
- ★ Conduct **competitor analysis** to show how your startup measures against similar companies that have successfully raised funds. Highlight similarities in growth potential, market conditions, and business models.

“You cannot talk about having a big market without data. We have to adapt our narrative to meet the expectations of different investors. It’s about presenting a polished story that perfectly aligns our goals with those of potential investors.”

– SUSAN NIO, CO-FOUNDER, LOVE CARE (INDONESIA)

THINK BIG

- ★ Instead of conservative goals, show **big, bold targets** that reflect your true potential. Back your ambitious figures with solid data and a clear growth plan. Identify not just realistic, but stretch goals, to showcase that you’re aiming high and that you have the strategy to get there. **Your ambition will set you apart**—embrace it and let it lead the way. Stay **resilient and positive**, even when faced with bias. Strive to get 100 no’s and know that the perfect yes is getting closer to you with every rejection you receive!²²

DEMONSTRATE THE IMPACT OF YOUR BUSINESS

- ★ Don’t be afraid to put your best foot forward and make the case for how your project is novel and important. This can be done by providing information about one’s qualifications and experience, highlighting your uniqueness, and generally **erring on the side of self-promotion**²³.
- ★ If your business has a **social or environmental impact**, capture metrics that quantify this impact. Building purpose-driven businesses attracts investment flows - with investors looking for a combination of purpose and profit, investors are increasingly interested in ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) factors, and strong impact metrics can differentiate your startup, even in traditional sectors like manufacturing, engineering etc.²⁴



You can articulate and track your impact through tools and certifications such as [BCorp](#), [Global Reporting Initiative](#), [2X Criteria](#) or creating tracking metrics customised to your business.



“Women tend to consider everything carefully, weighing every situation to optimise their choices. As a result, they are also more likely to accept lower risks and often take more time to make decisions. However, in some situations, this becomes their strength: it helps businesses become more sustainable (not relying on rapid growth) and better adapted to challenges.”

**– ANNIE VU,
CEO AND CO-FOUNDER,
TUBUDD JSC (VIET NAM)**

What we heard from investors²⁵

Impact investors, in particular, pointed out that they are going beyond just checking if a business is women-led or women-focused, and are explicitly keen to hear “how gender is embedded across the business model”.



© dragonimages / Freepik



Identifying Investors

What is identifying investors?

Identifying the right investors is crucial for your success. Sometimes it takes going out of your comfort zone to find the investors that understand and appreciate your vision. Once found, the right investor can become a mentor, offering guidance and support beyond just funding. They can connect you to the right people in the industry, expanding your network and opening up more opportunities.



WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Women-led businesses struggle to gain visibility and recognition in men-dominated referral networks and often lack access to crucial networks, resources, and mentorship opportunities, which are essential for understanding investor expectations.²⁶ Investors largely rely on referrals and inbound applications for pipeline development²⁷ and the investment space thrives on networks and informal connections. Investor networks are often homogeneous, however, made up of mostly men. This leads to women getting fewer referral opportunities since women are less likely to be a part of these existing networks. For example, entrepreneurship networks in STEM-related sectors dominated by men will likely lead to more men-led enterprises hearing about a specific investment opportunity. This is compounded in contexts where women avoid networking because they see it as inauthentic and transactional or don't feel comfortable and/or safe in networking situations.

Time poverty also restricts women's ability to engage in networks and activities outside their typical work day and this hinders their ability to gain visibility.²⁸ Gender biases can also discourage women from being outspoken and making the first move with potential investors, in a scenario when "women need to get on the radar of investors".²⁹



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

TAP INTO THE POWER OF NETWORKS

- ★ Be proactive in making connections. Many women find networking uncomfortable, but if you view it as a way to **advance your business and vision**, it can become more meaningful and easier to engage in.³⁰
- ★ Use any network you have (friends, family, previous work associates, etc.) to get introductions to investors. A **referral from a trusted source** can help overcome initial biases.
- ★ If you have attended university or participated in professional programmes, leverage those **alumni networks**. Alumni connections can be surprisingly powerful.

FIND AND ENGAGE WITH WOMEN-FOCUSED PROGRAMMES

- ★ Participate in **accelerators or incubators, specifically, women founder-focused programmes**, that can provide you with direct access to investors and mentors who are keen on supporting startups. Shortlist these programmes based on the type of investors they engage (friends and family, venture capitalists, peer to peer lenders, angel investors, family offices, etc.). Additionally, keep an eye out for investors that offer acceleration and technical assistance.³¹
- ★ Look for and attend **pitch events, startup competitions, industry events, women-focused entrepreneur groups, and networking sessions**. These events often attract a diverse group of investors looking for new opportunities. For example, at the Feminist Finance Forum 2024 organised by UNESCAP, 10 women-founded climate tech start-ups took part in a pitching competition, presenting their solution to potential investors.³²

LEVERAGE DIVERSE CHANNELS TO BUILD BRAND CREDIBILITY

- ★ Maintain a **professional and active presence** online (e.g., LinkedIn and other relevant platforms). A well-crafted profile highlighting your achievements can attract investor attention. Also, follow and engage with investors on LinkedIn and Twitter. Share relevant content, comment thoughtfully on their posts, and build rapport.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT INVESTOR

- ★ Seek out **women-focused funds and funds investing with a gender lens**. These can provide introductions to investors who are more likely to appreciate your vision.



Explore the Gender Lens Investment landscape through reports like Project Catalyst by 2X Global and SAGANA.³³

- ★ Look for investors who have **a track record of supporting diverse teams or women-led businesses**. Go through the portfolio companies of potential investors to see if they have invested in businesses similar to yours. This can indicate their interest and experience in your sector. Understand who the right investor is for your organisation!



Platforms like Crunchbase³⁴ can help filter investors based on their past investments.

- ★ Utilise **crowdfunding** to help you raise funds. Successful crowdfunded projects can potentially attract the attention of traditional investors.



Platforms like Kickstarter³⁵ and Indiegogo³⁶ help access a broad audience, validate your idea, and generate initial funding.

- ★ Look into **angel syndicates**, which are groups of investors who pool their resources to invest in startups. They often have diverse investment interests. Additionally, **family offices** could be useful as a potential investor network.

RESOURCE - Networks like BWIN (Bangladesh Women Investors Network)³⁷, Epic Angels - the Female Investor Collective,³⁸ and MAIN (Manila Angel Investors Network)³⁹ can be useful for connecting with angels who understand founders' context and can help you find experienced investors and syndicates.

LEVERAGE MENTORSHIP AND PEER LEARNING

- ★ Seek out mentors who've navigated the investment landscape and can **offer guidance. Feedback, specifically from successful founders**, presents an opportunity to learn and adapt your fundraising strategy.



Join communities like Women Founders - Google for Startups⁴⁰, She Loves Tech⁴¹, Lean In Circles,⁴² and leverage UN forums and networking platforms like the Feminist Finance Forum⁴³ to find mentors and a peer group of entrepreneurs.

- ★ The technical knowledge and skills required in the fundraising process need to be complemented with **soft skills**. Identify incubators/accelerators/courses that unpack complex concepts and demonstrate how they practically apply to your business – bridging the gap between knowledge and action.⁴⁴

© EyeEm / Freepik



“I was working for a former ecosystem builder for impact investing that worked with both entrepreneurs and investors. Something that we noticed is that when entrepreneurs seek investment they sometimes don’t showcase or highlight that they are women-led, or that they are making an impact. In the same way investors tag themselves or promote themselves, entrepreneurs should also do the same. It’s one of the pain points that we worked with entrepreneurs on - teaching them how to highlight and communicate the work they are doing as it is important in making matches.”

– FEMINIST FINANCE FORUM PARTICIPANT, MAY 2024

Pitching For Investment

What is pitching for investment?

A pitch is your chance to showcase your company, talent, and make a bold ask for capital. When pitching, founders need to confidently explain their model, be ready for questions, and follow up with additional materials or updates. While men sometimes exude irrational exuberance about their start-up ideas and believe they can deliver the impossible, women tend to be cautiously optimistic and may face unconscious bias.



WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Women face scrutiny across factors that are sometimes unrelated to their business acumen. Women founders may find it difficult to be seen as leaders because leadership is often equated with traditionally male behaviours.⁴⁵ Women's leadership potential sometimes shows in less conventional ways—being responsive to clients' needs, for example, rather than boldly asserting a point of view. In most cultures masculinity and leadership are closely linked: For many, the ideal leader, is decisive, assertive and independent. In contrast, women are expected to be nice, caretaking, and unselfish. The mismatch between conventionally feminine qualities and the qualities thought necessary for leadership puts female leaders in a double bind. Numerous studies have shown that women who excel in traditionally male domains are viewed as competent but less likeable than their male counterparts.⁴⁶ Gender and social norms about women's roles and characteristics can make it harder for women to be seen as founders and be taken seriously when pitching. How women founders are perceived—how you dress, talk, your “executive presence,” capacity to “fill a room,” and leadership style—often becomes the focus during pitch evaluation.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

CREATE A ROBUST PITCH DECK THAT COMMUNICATES YOUR UNIQUENESS AND GROWTH PLAN

- ★ Have a **detailed pitch deck, financials, and any other relevant documents** ready. Make sure they are professional and thorough. A **strong storyline, with case studies and data** that back your business case, can be a great aid to guide your presentation and boost your confidence.



Create a professional and concise pitch deck using Guy Kawasaki's 10-slide format.⁴⁷

- ★ **Showcase data around customer feedback, testimonials, and case studies** to document the impact of your product or service. Positive reviews and success stories provide tangible evidence of your value proposition. Record any endorsements, partnerships, or collaborations with reputable organisations. This social proof can lend credibility and counter biases by showing that others trust and support your business.
- ★ Don't hesitate to request the necessary funding and share the **utilisation plan. Focus on your USP (Unique Selling Point)!**
- ★ Enhance your pitch with **strong visuals. Infographics, charts, and videos** can make your presentation more engaging and easier to understand.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

- ★ After your pitch, **follow up with additional materials or updates** After your pitch, follow up with additional materials or updates. This shows diligence and keeps the conversation going.
- ★ Continuously **seek feedback** on your pitch from mentors, peers, and investors, and **refine your approach** based on their insights.

FOCUS ON PURPOSE AND HIGHLIGHT THE SCALABILITY OF YOUR BUSINESS

Focus on articulating and communicating your organisation's purpose and gather the right data to showcase your **resilience, achievements and sustainable growth trajectory**.



Share the authentic core values and purpose of your organisation through Jim Collins' Vision Framework⁴⁸.

- ★ With your team, expand upon your unique value proposition, growth potential, and past successes. **Identify clear milestones and achievements to include in your pitch.** The more progress you can identify and showcase, the harder it is for biases to overshadow your potential.
- ★ **Conduct a budget analysis to understand your efficiency in using investment funds** and record past investment outcomes. For example, if previous funding rounds led to significant milestones or growth, document this data to show you're a good steward of investor capital.

BUILD YOUR LEADERSHIP SKILLS THROUGH COACHING AND NETWORKING

- ★ Create a **safe setting** like a coaching relationship or participate in a women's leadership programme. This is critical for developing your leadership identity as these environments will allow you to interpret and internalise key messages about leadership, helping you grow and thrive.
- ★ Identify common experiences and build a **supportive network of mentors and peers.** This is a game-changer as it gives you opportunities to talk openly, take risks, and be vulnerable without fear of being misunderstood or judged. These connections are crucial when discussing sensitive topics like gender bias or reflecting on personal leadership challenges.
- ★ **Pitch to women investors.** This can provide diverse perspectives, unique insights, and a deeper understanding of businesses run by and for women, while opening up new opportunities and sharing feedback to give your pitch the edge it needs.



© drobotdean / Freepik



WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Women are often required to prove themselves while men are asked to share their aspirations. During the pitching phase, women and men don't get asked the same questions.⁴⁹ Women are more often asked about risk and risk prevention (safety, vigilance, responsibility), while men get questions about their achievements, aspirations, and growth potential. This focus on risk and reservations in discussing successes, often rooted in gender and social norms, can make investors think that women founders are not ambitious enough. "Women are much more conservative when talking about growth"⁵⁰ and may downplay their successes, sometimes attributing them to luck rather than hard work. This perception can potentially decrease investor appeal and interest in women-led ventures.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

STRATEGIZE TO ADDRESS 'PREVENTION' QUESTIONS

- ★ **Anticipate and practice responses to 'prevention' questions.** Turn questions about risk into 'promotion' opportunities to highlight your knowledge, strategic thinking and problem-solving skills. This can help avoid undervaluing the business - by you or by the investors. As one founder shared, "Women should view aggressive questions as an opportunity to showcase the value of their businesses and anticipate these questions".⁵¹



Use Village Capital's Smarter Systems Question Bank⁵² and the Equity Lens Toolkit for Venture Capital Investors⁵³ to prepare for pitches and anticipate investor questions.

- ★ Clearly articulate your **business model, growth strategy and a clear path to profitability.** Investors need to see the big picture and your roadmap to achieving it.



Use the Lean Canvas Framework⁵⁴ to clarify and communicate your business model.

- ★ Investors often **invest in teams as much as ideas**, specifically strong co-founders with complementary skills. **Build a well-rounded and diverse team**, and identify the strengths you can highlight as a team.

LEVERAGE STORYTELLING TO HIGHLIGHT ALIGNMENT WITH INVESTOR GOALS

- ★ **Be bold about your vision and achievements.** Don't downplay your successes—own them. Emphasise your milestones and growth. Use data to back up your claims and showcase your track record of success.
- ★ Be ready to **pitch in various formats**, whether it's a quick elevator pitch, a detailed presentation, or an impromptu conversation.
- ★ Tell a **compelling story** that ties your personal journey to your business. Make it relatable and memorable.



Build your product and brand story through frameworks like Storybrand⁵⁵, 4 steps to epiphany⁵⁶ etc.

“Women founders know their businesses well, but articulating and advocating for them is a different story. This skill needs to be honed and developed to successfully navigate the initial screening process. Additionally, women entrepreneurs face unequal experiences due to cultural norms and biases in financial systems across different countries. Even if women-led businesses pass the screening process, they often encounter further roadblocks during due diligence. SMEs frequently face issues such as inadequate financial governance and lack of robust management systems. These enterprises often lack the necessary resources to ensure proper systems and controls are in place because their businesses are typically smaller and less capitalised, translating into higher risks. These challenges are examples of the numerous biases that disadvantage women-owned enterprises. Investors like Sweef Capital must invest significant effort and resources to unlock the potential of these enterprises, demonstrating their capability to scale independently and deliver impactful results.”

– MA ROWENA L. REYES, DIRECTOR, SWEEF CAPITAL MANAGEMENT PTE LTD



Conclusion

While women entrepreneurs face significant challenges, there are also tremendous opportunities. If barriers were eliminated and women could create and grow businesses at the same rate as men, estimates show that 5-6 trillion USD in net value addition could be generated around the world.⁵⁷

We hope that women founders at all stages of their fundraising can use this Guide to support their journeys.

Additionally, entrepreneur support organisations in emerging markets can use and complement this Guide to ensure women founders get the right support when fundraising.

Women founders can take action and stay resilient. Nevertheless, fully overcoming these challenges will require interventions from investors, policymakers, and other actors in the entrepreneurship ecosystem (e.g. mentorship programmes, targeted financing, growth support strategies for women founders).⁵⁸ Supporting women founders is not just a matter of fairness; it is a strategic imperative that can transform economies, grow investors' pipelines and improve their returns, and create a more equitable and dynamic future for all.

Endnotes

- 1 Miller, Amisha, and Saurabh Lall, "Smarter Systems: How Tweaking Your Diligence Process Can Unlock Overlooked Opportunities-Investor Implementation Guide" (Washington D.C., IFC, 2023). Available at <https://vilcap.com/smarter-systems>.
- 2 Value for Women, "Looking Back: A Decade of Insights on Gender Inclusion in Business, Investment, and Finance in Emerging Markets" Available at <https://www.v4w.org/uploads/documents/Insights-Volume-1-Issue-1-Looking-Back-August-7.pdf>
- 3 According to research conducted by HP on the confidence gender gap, men apply for jobs when they have 60 percent of the skills required while women only do so if they have 100 percent of the skills. Tara Sophia Mohr, "Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified", Harvard Business Review (2014), Available at <https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified>
- 4 Camille Hebert, "Gender Stereotypes and Entrepreneur Financing", (2023), Available at https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/-/media/files/departments/real-estate/camille-hebert_gender-stereotypes_ici2023.ashx?la=en
- 5 Alison Wood Brooks, Laura Huang, Sarah Wood Kearney, and Fiona E. Murray, Investors prefer entrepreneurial ventures pitched by attractive men, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS) 111, no. 12: 4427-4431 (2014), Available at <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.1321202111>
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Katie Abouzahr, Matt Krentz, John Harthorne, and Frances Brooks Taplett, "Why Women Owned Startups Are a Better Bet," Boston Consulting Group, (2018), Available at <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/why-women-owned-startups-are-better-bet>
- 9 Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, "The case for investing in women entrepreneurs", Available at <https://we-fi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Fi-Case-for-Investment.pdf>
- 10 The Asia Pacific Top 100 Women-Powered, High-Growth Businesses Report", JPMorgan Chase Bank, Available at https://privatebank.jpmorgan.com/apac/en/insights/wealth-planning/asia-pacific-top-100-women-powered-high-growth-businesses-report?utm_source=jpmwm-organicsocial-li&utm_medium=na-apac-top-100-women&utm_campaign=en-pb-wotm&utm_content=staticimage
- 11 Miller, Amisha, and Saurabh Lall, "Smarter Systems: How Tweaking Your Diligence Process Can Unlock Overlooked Opportunities-Investor Implementation Guide", IFC, (2023). Available at <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2023-delta/2-smarter-systems-investor-implementation-guide-optm.pdf>.
- 12 International Finance Corporation, "Moving Toward Gender Balance in Private Equity and Venture Capital", (2019), Available at <https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2019/gender-balance-in-emerging-markets>
- 13 Kanze, Dana, Huang Laura, Conley Mark, and Higgins Tory. E. "We ask men to win & women not to lose: Closing the gender gap in startup funding." Academy of Management Proceedings, no.1: 10010. (2017), Available at <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amj.2016.1215>
- 14 Primary research - interview with incubators and investors
- 15 Ibid
- 16 Equidam, Create a fair valuation for your startup", Available at <https://www.equidam.com/>
- 17 BizEquity, Available at <https://www.bizequity.com/>
- 18 PitchBook, Available at <https://pitchbook.com/>
- 19 Carolyn Levy, "Safe Financing Documents", Y Combinator, Available at <https://www.ycombinator.com/documents>
- 20 Calm Company Fund, "Shared Earnings Agreement", Available at <https://calmfund.com/shared-earnings-agreement>
- 21 Orange Bond Initiative, Available at <https://iixglobal.com/orange-bond-initiative/>
- 22 Lexie Smith, "How to Feel Empowered as a Female Entrepreneur", (2019), Available at <https://lexiesmithpr.medium.com/how-to-feel-empowered-as-a-female-entrepreneur-8dc0e2379a52>
- 23 Stanford: The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, "Gender bias and women-led enterprise", (2015), Available at <https://gender.stanford.edu/news/gender-bias-and-women-led-enterprise>
- 24 The Asia Pacific Top 100 Women-Powered, High-Growth Businesses Report", JPMorgan Chase Bank, Available at https://privatebank.jpmorgan.com/apac/en/insights/wealth-planning/asia-pacific-top-100-women-powered-high-growth-businesses-report?utm_source=jpmwm-organicsocial-li&utm_medium=na-apac-top-100-women&utm_campaign=en-pb-wotm&utm_content=staticimage
- 25 Primary research - interview with incubators and investors

- 26 Primary research - interview with incubators and investors
- 27 Ibid
- 28 Herminia Ibarra, Robin J. Ely, and Deborah M. Kolb, "Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers", Harvard Business Review, September 2013. Available at <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers?registration=success>.
- 29 Primary research - interview with investor
- 30 Herminia Ibarra, Robin J. Ely, and Deborah M. Kolb, Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers, Harvard Business Review, (2013), Available at <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers?registration=success>
- 31 Value for Women, with support from USAID, the Visa Foundation, and ANDE, "Pathways for Success: Women's Entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia- A report outlining what women social entrepreneurs need to succeed", Available at <https://www.v4w.org/uploads/documents/pathways-report-v5-october-13-2021.pdf>
- 32 'UN forum catalyzes collective action to make feminist finance a reality for Asia and the Pacific', Available at <https://www.unescap.org/news/un-forum-catalyzes-collective-action-make-feminist-finance-reality-asia-and-pacific>
- 33 2X Global and Sagana, with support from Visa Foundation, "Project Catalyst: Tracking gender lens investing activity in private markets", (2024), Available at, <https://www.2xglobal.org/knowledge-hub-blog/projectcatalyst>
- 34 Crunchbase, Available at <https://www.crunchbase.com/> (2024)
- 35 Kickstarter, Available at <https://www.kickstarter.com/>
- 36 Indiegogo, Available at <https://www.indiegogo.com/>
- 37 Bangladesh Women Investors Network, Available at <https://www.bwin.vc/>
- 38 Epic Angel Network, Available at <https://www.epicangelnetwork.com/team>
- 39 Manila Angel Investors Network, Available at <https://www.main.ph/>
- 40 'Google, "Supporting women founders", Available at <https://startup.google.com/programs/women-founders/>
- 41 She Loves Tech, "The world's largest acceleration platform for women and technology", Available at <https://www.shelovestech.org/>
- 42 'Accelerate your career with Lean In Circles', Available at <https://leanin.org/circles>
- 43 Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 'Feminist Finance Forum', Available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/2024/feminist-finance-forum-2024#>
- 44 'Financial Management Training for Microentrepreneurs: Using scalable financial heuristics via mobile phones", Available at <http://www.ideas42.org/project/financial-management-training-mobile-phones/>
- 45 <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers?registration=success>
- 46 Monisha Varadan, Kamal Hassan, Claudia Zeisberger, 'Getting Rid of Gender Bias in Venture Capital', (2019), Available at '<https://knowledge.insead.edu/economics-finance/getting-rid-gender-bias-venture-capital>
- 47 Guy Kawasaki, The only 10 slides you need in a pitch, Available at <https://guykawasaki.com/the-only-10-slides-you-need-in-your-pitch/>
- 48 Jim Collins, "Vision Framework", Available at <https://www.jimcollins.com/tools/vision-framework.pdf>
- 49 Village Capital, "Smarter Systems: How Tweaking Your Diligence Process Can Unlock Overlooked Opportunities-Investor Implementation Guide" (Washington D.C., IFC, 2023). Available at <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2023-delta/2-smarter-systems-investor-implementation-guide-optm.pdf>.
- 50 Primary research - interview with entrepreneur support organisation
- 51 Primary research - interview with researcher focused on investors
- 52 Village Capital, "Smarter Systems: How Tweaking Your Diligence Process Can Unlock Overlooked Opportunities-Investor Implementation Guide" (Washington D.C., IFC, 2023), Available at <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2023-delta/2-smarter-systems-investor-implementation-guide-optm.pdf>.
- 53 ESCAP and Value for Women, "Equity Lens Toolkit for Venture Capital Investors", (2024), Available at <https://www.v4w.org/equity-lens-toolkit-for-venture-capital-investors>
- 54 Steve Blank, Why the Lean Start-Up Changes Everything: A faster, smarter methodology for launching companies may make business plans obsolete, (2013), Available at <https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything>
- 55 Donald Miller, "Your brand is not the hero: How Story will revolutionize your marketing", Available at <https://storybrand.com/downloads/your-brand-is-not-the-hero.pdf>
- 56 Steven G. Blank, "The Four Steps to the Epiphany: Successful Strategies for Products that Win", Second Edition, (2006), Available at https://web.stanford.edu/group/e145/cgi-bin/winter/drupal/upload/handouts/Four_Steps.pdf
- 57 Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, "The case for investing in women entrepreneurs", Available at <https://we-fi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Fi-Case-for-Investment.pdf>
- 58 Ibid

