WiSER

INCLUSIVE PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE GROWTH

Co-founding Partners

MASDAR

ZAYED SUSTAINABILITY PRIZE

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Foreword

Dr. Lamya Fawwaz

Executive Director, Brand & Strategic Initiatives, Masdar and WiSER Program Director

Real transformation begins with people. It begins when someone is given the confidence, the opportunity, and the support to step into leadership and remain there.

Over the past 10 years, WiSER has been committed to preparing women to lead, connecting them with mentors, expanding their networks and strengthening their ability to influence decisions across sustainability, energy, policy, finance and innovation. We have seen what sustained investment in women's leadership can achieve.

Today, more than 180 women have participated in WiSER's programs, with many of them leading initiatives, shaping policy, advancing innovation and mentoring others.

This is the cycle at the heart of WiSER: women who are supported become leaders, and those leaders go on to support others. Over time, that cycle strengthens institutions and increases participation.

Today's global economy is being reshaped by rapid technological advancement, evolving economic models, and new forms of collaboration. In this environment, long-term growth depends on how effectively institutions can harness talent, align capital and enable innovation. Leadership, and the breadth of experience it reflects, plays a defining role in that equation.

The conversations at the 2026 WiSER Annual Forum, held during Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week under the theme, Inclusive Pathways for Transformative Growth, reinforced this mindset. Across finance, governance, innovation, human capital and foresight, one clear insight emerged: inclusive approaches strengthen performance. When participation expands, decision-making improves. Institutions become more adaptive, more capable, and better equipped to build leadership pipelines that strengthen succession and expand opportunity.

This White Paper offers a practical framework for leaders who recognize that inclusive leadership strengthens innovation, resilience and long-term performance. It outlines pathways to align talent, capital and decision-making in ways that unlock broader participation and sustainable growth.

As WiSER enters its second decade, our focus remains clear: to enable women to lead, not as an exception, but as an expectation. Because when leadership reflects the full spectrum of talent and perspective, institutions are stronger, and growth is more resilient.

Executive Summary

This White Paper shows that growth, resilience, and competitiveness are driven primarily by how systems are designed, rather than by individual choices alone. Persistent gender gaps reflect structural inefficiencies in capital allocation, governance, leadership, and innovation that suppress performance and increase risk. Addressing these gaps is therefore a leadership responsibility for anyone seeking sustainable advantage.

Gender equity is a system design challenge with direct performance impact. Systems that concentrate decision-making in narrow groups and rely on opaque power structures tend to underperform.

This White Paper presents evidence indicating that more inclusive system design is associated with stronger institutional performance, including more efficient capital allocation, faster innovation, strengthened leadership succession, and improved crisis response.

The analytical lens

This White Paper applies a consistent decision-maker framework across six core systems: 1) Finance, 2) Policy, 3) Innovation, 4) Human capital, 5) Leadership, 6) Foresight and crisis response. Each chapter examines, under the decision-maker framework, how current systems are configured, reveals the outcomes they produce, assesses the impact on performance, and then identifies practical levers for redesign.

Where leaders can act now

Finance:
Rewire capital allocation and investment governance to expand female entrepreneurs' access to the global economy

Innovation:
Redesign research, funding, and commercialization to accelerate breakthroughs of female-led innovations

Policy:
Embed inclusive governance frameworks that reform laws and systems to eliminate structural barriers for women

Human capital:
Invest in inclusive education and support female upskilling in areas such as STEM and AI, to shape technologies that serve all

Leadership:
Redesign leadership selection and advancement to enable succession and gradually normalize female leadership and accountability

Foresight and crisis response:
Increase female representation in crisis planning, support gender-disaggregated data collection to reduce foresight blind spots and improve disaster preparedness for all

Organizations that take system redesign seriously outperform those that treat inclusion as a side issue. Gender-equal system design is a competitive advantage.

Setting the scene: Gender equity as a strategic system design challenge

Looking ahead, meaningful economic progress will likely require redesigning the systems that shape how capital, authority, and opportunity are distributed.

Persistent gender inequalities often arise not only from personal or cultural factors alone, but also emerge from institutional rules, incentives, governance mechanisms, and decision-making structures that generate unequal outcomes.

Addressing these structural weaknesses is central to economic strategy.

This White Paper treats gender equity as a system design challenge. It examines how six institutional systems translate underlying inequalities into outcomes. Each system determines who participates, whose ideas are backed, who advances into authority, and who carries greater risk during disruption. Understanding how these mechanisms operate is essential to creating institutions capable of thriving in a rapidly changing global environment.

Each chapter examines the system through two lenses - challenges and opportunities:

1 **CHALLENGES diagnose system failures such as inefficient capital allocation or foresight that ignore key perspectives.**

2 **OPPORTUNITIES outline strategic potential created when systems are redesigned such as stronger economic growth, stronger resilience, or enhanced innovation.**

The paper concludes with ten cross cutting recommended actions, synthesizing insights from across the chapters and from high level roundtables at the 2026 WiSER Annual Forum during Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, where leaders from government, industry, finance, technology, energy and civil society debated priorities for system redesign.

This structure keeps the focus on system architecture rather than repeating cross-cutting social factors. Structural factors such as stereotypes or distribution of unpaid care work are acknowledged here in the introduction as background conditions, but the focus of each subsequent chapter is strictly on the architecture of the system itself.

The White Paper draws on global academic research, private sector data, international reports and expert insights. Some recommended actions are ambitious and may require regional adaptation, but the Paper is intentionally visionary and includes all proposals to reflect the full scope of ideas and potential impact.

This Paper is for decision makers who shape institutional architecture, including policymakers, regulators, CEOs, investors, development actors and leaders of major public sector and private sector organizations. It provides an actionable framework to redesign systems, improve performance and unlock underused talent. The aim is not marginal adjustments but durable change that delivers equitable, effective and future ready outcomes.

Chapter 1: Catalyzing systemic finance for gender equity

From gender-lens investing to economy-wide capital flows that unlock inclusive growth

Treating gender equity as a macroeconomic imperative is core to building a modern, resilient, and high-performing global economy. Yet, at today's pace, the World Economic Forum projects 152 years to close the economic gender gap.[1]

This is not only a social shortfall but a drag on global GDP, rooted in the design of current financial systems.

CHALLENGES

The system's internal failure: a leaky talent pipeline

The financial industry lacks internal diversity, creating a homogenous decision-making culture. In emerging markets, women hold only 11 percent of senior investment roles in private equity (PE), and nearly 70 percent of senior teams consist entirely of men.[2] This is a serious pipeline issue and a structural barrier to advancement. Data shows that men in investing roles are approximately 50 percent more likely to be promoted than their female colleagues, indicating a systemic bias that blocks the ascent of qualified women.[3] This internal design impacts external investment decisions. Because hiring and deal sourcing rely heavily on personal networks, homogenous teams tend to circulate capital within male-dominated circles, limiting access for diverse entrepreneurs.[4]

Gender representation by level in privat equity firm globally[1], % in role and level, EOY 2022

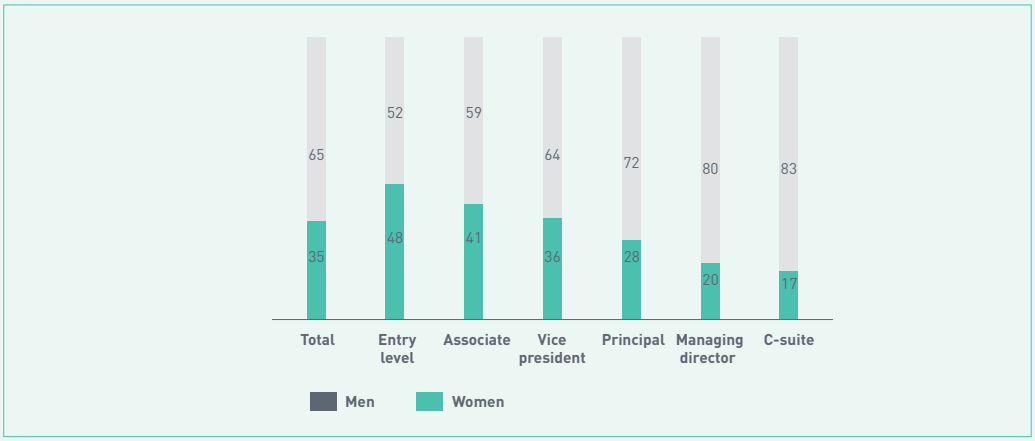


Figure 2: Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in PE firms globally.[5]
Source: McKinsey & Company (2023).

Biased processes and capital gaps

Institutionalized biases embedded within the investment process itself lead to distorted and skewed capital allocation. Research indicates that investors routinely direct promotion-focused questions (e.g. how do you plan to acquire customers?) to male entrepreneurs, whereas female entrepreneurs are disproportionately confronted with prevention-focused questions (e.g. how many daily and monthly active customers do you have?). This subtle but powerful difference in framing directly contributes to a significant gender disadvantage in funding outcomes.[6] The result of these biased systems is a massive capital gap: female entrepreneurs receive less than 10 percent of all private equity and venture capital funding, even though women serve as leading executives in more deals.[7]

Interconnected barriers in developing economies

Financial systems are closely linked to broader legal and market institutions that surround them. In many developing economies, limited access to capital is not only a financial issue but also the result of legal and regulatory constraints. Even where business laws are formally gender-neutral, discriminatory personal status laws can still restrict women's ability to own assets, sign contracts, or access financing.

These barriers dampen investor confidence and limit capital flow. This can be seen in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, where only 1 percent of gender-lens impact investment goes to the region and just 2 percent of gender-lens investment firms are located there. This reinforces a structural disconnect that perpetuates limited local expertise, weak capital deployment, and the continued underfinancing of women-led enterprises.[8]

[1]Based on data provided by 41 private equity firms. Responses cover more than 22,000 employees. Unique firm count by region: Americas = 37, Europe = 24, Asia-Pacific = 16.

[2]Includes entry-level roles through managing director roles.

Breakdown of gender investor headquarters

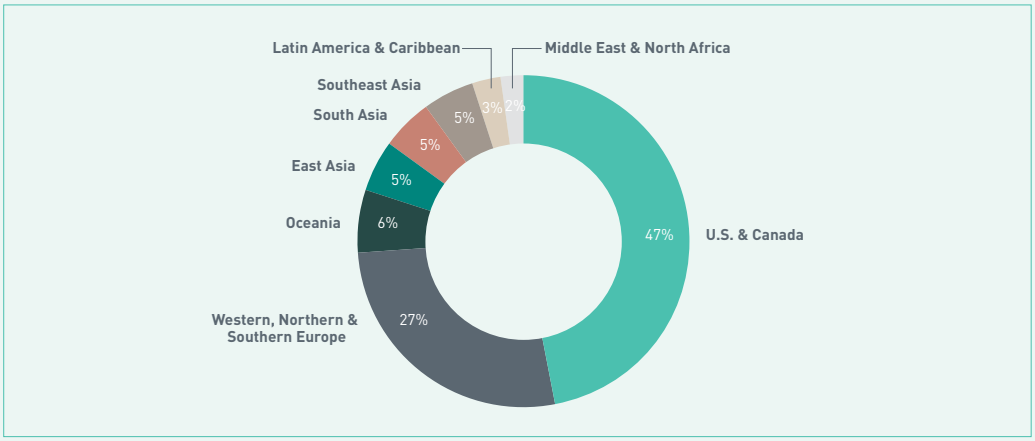


Figure 3: Breakdown of gender investor headquarters, by region.[9]
Source: GIIN (2020).

OPPORTUNITIES

The performance premium associated with gender equity

The business case for gender equity is strong and quantifiable. Diverse investment teams and leadership structures are correlated with superior financial performance. Emerging-market PE and venture capital funds with gender-balanced senior investment teams, which consist between 30 percent to 70 percent of women, outperformed both male- and female-dominated teams. These balanced teams generated 0.18x more value, demonstrating that diversity strengthens performance in investment decisions.[10] This performance advantage extends to the portfolio companies themselves. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams are up to 30 percent more likely to achieve above-average profitability. This confirms that gender equity can be a powerful driver of corporate performance.[11]

Unlocking new markets and spurring innovation

The financial system is overlooking massive market potential by neglecting women as consumers, producers and distributors. A strategic focus on women's distinct needs and market roles can unlock entirely new revenue streams and drive innovation. At the macro level, projections show that tailoring financial products, such as insurance, to the specific life cycles of women could create a new market estimated at $1.7 trillion.[12] This principle is potent in action: Unilever's Shakti program in India engages rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, expanding distribution into underserved areas while generating income and economic participation.[13]

Chapter 2: Transforming policy and governance for inclusive economies

Harnessing inclusive decision-making to design systems that work for everyone

Inclusive governance, where diverse voices shape policy and allocate resources, is essential for navigating complex global challenges and unlocking equitable growth. Excluding women depresses economies, skews policy, and stalls progress. Political empowerment, one of the four dimensions of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, captures women's participation and leadership in political decision-making. To date, only 22.9 percent of the gap has been closed. At the current pace, achieving full parity would take 162 years.[14] This deficit directly influences policy outcomes on social protection, care infrastructure, climate resilience, and economic stability.

CHALLENGES

Agenda-setting rules hard-wire blind spots

In many countries, legislative rules concentrate agenda-setting power in a small group of mostly male committee chairs and party leaders. Women hold only 27.2 percent of parliamentary seats globally, and just 23.7 percent of committee chair positions.[15] Persistent gaps in women's political representation, combined with weakening factors such as parliamentary effectiveness and credible electoral processes, undermine inclusive agenda-setting and erode political resilience.[16] When decision-making structures privilege narrow interests and timelines, critical areas such as care systems, informal work protections, and public safety remain structurally under-legislated.

World and regional averages of women in parliament

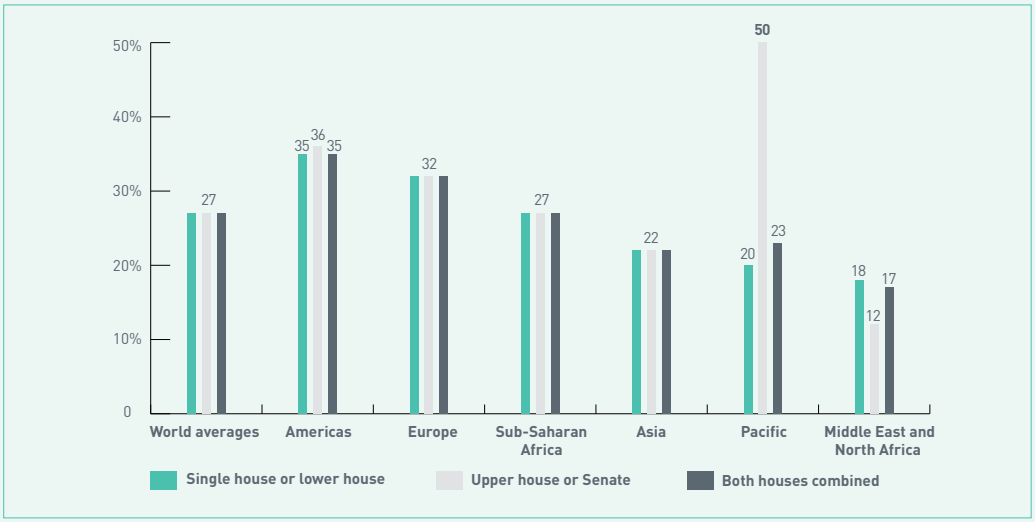


Figure 4: World and regional averages of women in parliament.[17]
Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women (2025).

Regulatory standards built on partial data

Many regulators rely on datasets and testing protocols that are not gender-disaggregated and use reporting templates without gender-specific indicators. When crash tests, clinical trials, credit-scoring models, or platform safety indicators are calibrated on "average" users, they overlook women's distinct needs and perpetuate inadequate designs. Regulatory bodies often lack gender-disaggregated consumer complaint data or gender-specific safety reporting, making it impossible to detect differentiated impacts.[18]

Studies across 45 African countries show that higher women's representation in institutions correlates with improved environmental and governance scores, partly because more diverse bodies demand more granular evidence.[19] However, in contexts where institutions are weak or corrupt, "window-dressing" inclusion, where women are recruited into existing corrupt network, can actually worsen human development outcomes.[20]

System rules structurally limit women's legal rights

The gap between legal rights on paper and women's ability to exercise those rights in practice is wider than equal-opportunity laws suggest. Effective implementation of these laws depends on enforcement systems, monitoring mechanisms, and accessible services: although equal-opportunity laws imply women enjoy around 64 percent of the rights of men, a global expert survey showed that many economies have established less than 40 percent of the systems required to implement those rights.

Safety and childcare are the biggest obstacles preventing women from fully taking part in economic and social life.[21] The discrepancy is stark: Around 52 percent of economies mandate equal pay, but only 18 percent provide the transparency or enforcement measures needed to ensure it.[22]

Development of women's representation

Over the past three decades, women's overall representation in national parliaments has increased from 11.3 percent in 1995 to 27.2 percent in 2025.[23] This progress was driven by institutional reforms, such as mandatory gender quotas, parity laws, and financial incentives for parties, combined with global normative frameworks.

Countries that embedded these measures achieved parity and demonstrated that inclusive governance improves policy responsiveness and social investment returns.[24]

World and regional averages of women in parliament

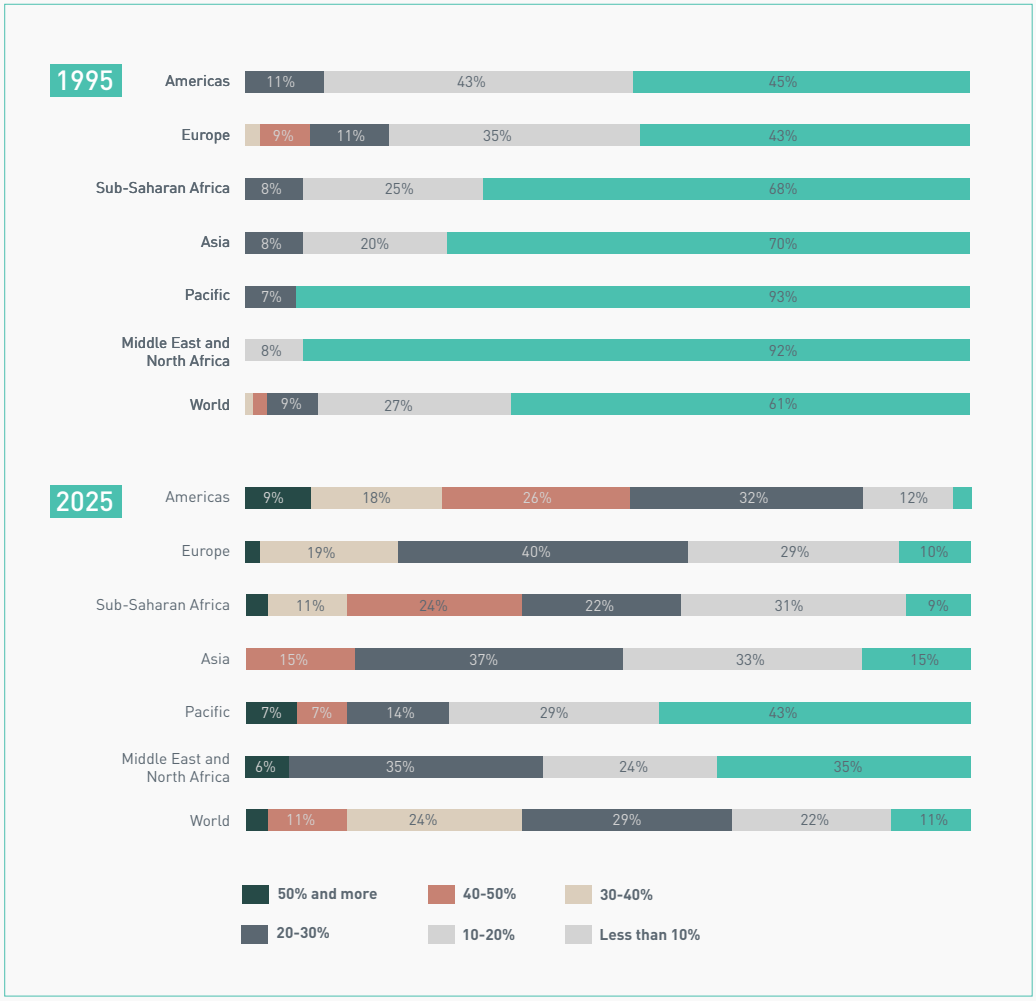


Figure 5: Share (in %) of countries in the region by percentage of women Members of Parliament.[25]

Source: Inter Parliamentary Union (2025).

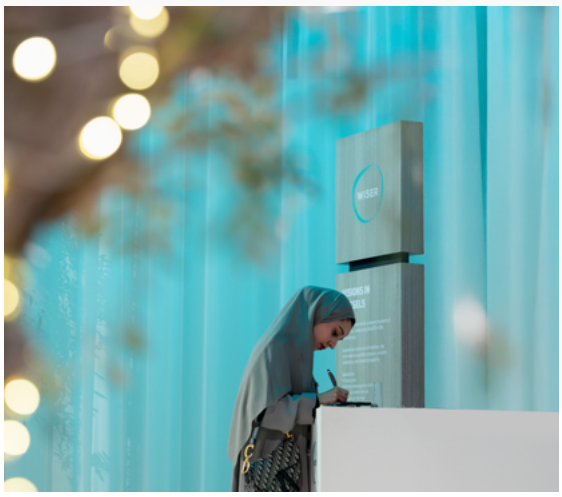
Note: The percentages show the share of countries among total countries among total countries in the region for which the data is available. The total number of countries in 1995 is 172, and for 2025 is 185.

Gender laws for more resilient economies

Recent international standards have shifted the global objective for women's political involvement from a 30 percent "critical mass" to a 50 percent gender parity goal, defining parity as a permanent sharing of power across political, economic, and private spheres.[26] Although, political empowerment has improved by only 0.7 percentage points between 2024 and 2025, some countries like Iceland, Finland, and Bangladesh, have closed the political empowerment gap by more than 50 percent.[27] In Africa, gender political inclusion and democracy has a strong positive impact on environmental health and ecosystem vitality.[28] Gender equity progress has been uneven since 2018, but targeted reforms, such as gender quotas in Uzbekistan and constitutional parity in Mexico, show that strong institutional mechanisms can significantly expand women's political participation and representation.[29]

Gender-diversified governance for holistic risk management

Despite historically low figures, many parliaments have achieved significant gains: in 2024, countries with legislated gender quotas reported an average of 31.2 percent women elected or appointed, compared to 16.8 percent without.[30] Women's political participation strengthens public trust, advances social welfare, legal protections and transparency, and is linked to reduced conflict risk.[31] Embedding gender parity reshapes how risks are assessed and mitigated, leading to faster post-crisis recovery and improved child health and schooling outcomes, supporting the integration of gender-inclusion metrics into national risk registers.



Chapter 3: Innovating and deploying solutions at scale

Leveraging technology, talent and entrepreneurship to build resilient communities

Redesigning research and innovation systems to include women is essential for stronger models, faster idea translation, and global competitiveness. Governance rules and investment criteria shape who contributes to solutions, and when they restrict participation, they narrow the ideas, data, safety checks, and insights that drive long-term performance.

CHALLENGES

Gender gaps in start-ups and ventures

Women remain markedly underrepresented in entrepreneurship: In 2022, only 24 percent of Deep Tech start ups had at least one woman founder and just 14 percent of all founders were women. Women also make up only 10.4 percent of solo Deep Tech founders, and female founded teams receive just 11.4 percent of total Deep Tech funding despite representing 17.4 percent of start ups.[32]

This underrepresentation is driven by structural barriers: Deep Tech relies on STEM fields where women remain underrepresented, limiting the pool of potential founders. Women face reduced access to technical networks, fewer role models, and persistent credibility gaps when pitching to investors. These dynamics reinforce founder discouragement, perpetuating the low share of women in Deep Tech ventures.

Funding governance excludes emerging talent

Women apply for grants less often and receive smaller and fewer follow-up grants, which limits long-term research output.[33] Although grant success rates between men and women are similar across major science and engineering fields, funding systems reward past funding and established networks reinforce women's underrepresentation in R&D. These challenges add to existing inequalities: women submit fewer grant applications, face a 19.5 percent higher yearly risk of leaving academia, and ultimately produce far fewer publications (35 percent fewer in biology and 12 percent fewer in engineering) over their careers.[34] Reduced research time and lower submissions delay promotions in systems that reward volume, constraining seed funding, longitudinal studies, and interdisciplinary collaborations essential for breakthrough commercialization.[35]

Gender disparities in R&D commercialization

In R&D commercialization, gender disparities remain stark. Globally, women are still underrepresented in patent-intensive fields such as engineering: While women make up more than 50 percent of researchers in some countries such as Myanmar, North Macedonia, and Serbia, others like Togo, Mali, Japan, and Belgium remain below 20 percent.[36] These differences often stem from structural factors including funding practices, evaluation criteria, and professional networks that have historically evolved around male-dominated disciplines.

Percentage of women in research and development by region in 2012 and 2022

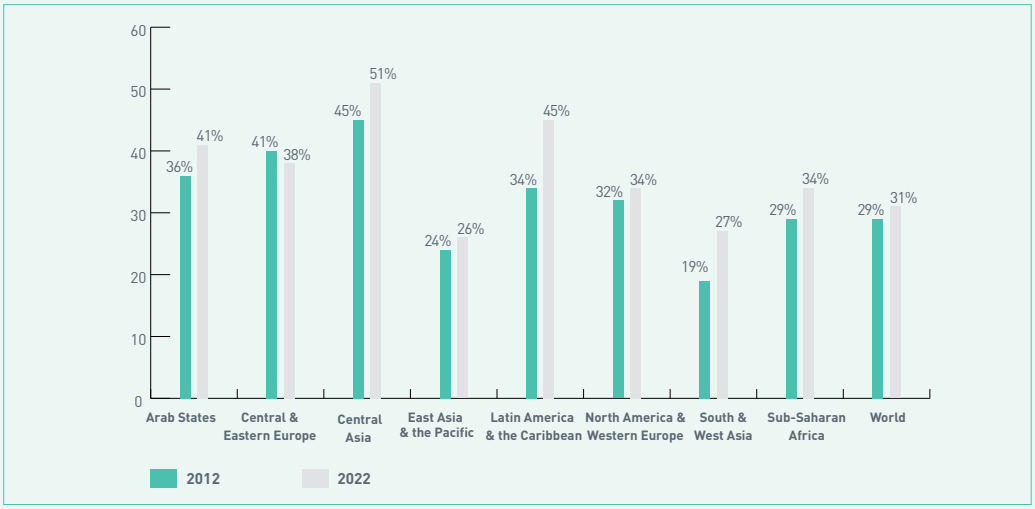


Figure 6: Percentage of women in research and development by region in 2012 and 2022.[37]
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2024).

A look at Germany illustrates how this dynamic can play out in practice: in Germany women make up 29.4 percent of researchers but only 15.6 percent of business R&D founders. This gap can weaken technology transfer, slow the growth of innovation hubs, and reduce the diversity in commercialization by 13–15 percent. This can lead to longer time to market and lower returns, especially in sectors such as biotechnology and AI.[38] The example highlights a broader pattern seen across many innovation systems.

OPPORTUNITIES

Parity panels boost citation impact

Gender-balanced review panels improve research quality across entire systems. When women's participation on panels increased, funded projects produced papers with five times more citations, innovation in key hubs accelerated, and high-risk fields like AI and quantum became more resilient.[39]

Gender-diverse teams also achieve higher novelty scores across medical science, improving AI model accuracy, strengthening safety compliance, and enabling broader deployment of prototypes.[40] There is an untapped performance reservoir awaiting systematic activation in innovation hubs worldwide.

Inclusive standards drive market expansion

Inclusive procurement standards that prioritize real innovation and cross-disciplinary collaboration help diverse inventor teams generate technologies with higher returns, wider market reach, and stronger user alignment.[41]

In innovation hubs and growth accelerators, inclusive standards support hybrid models that blend academic R&D and venture acceleration, helping teams navigate regulation and user validation more effectively.

Gender-inclusive initiatives increase participation

Gender-inclusive initiatives and targeted approaches can significantly increase women's participation and leadership. Initiatives such as parity protocols, inclusive accelerators, and structured mentoring have driven tangible gains in participation, innovation, and economic impact.

Jordan provides a clear example: over 60 percent of students in natural sciences, medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy are women, while the share is around 28 percent in engineering and approximately 45 percent in computer science.[42]

Chapter 4: Advancing human capital and skills for the future of work

Closing the gender gap in STEM and emerging technologies like AI through inclusive education and upskilling

AI's rise is a defining moment for human capital, but it exposes a system-level failure: education and training structures keep women underrepresented in STEM and AI, embedding bias in AI systems and organizations. Redesigning curricula, procurement, and performance standards is therefore critical for resilience and competitiveness.

CHALLENGES

Persistent pipeline gaps

Women represent about 35 percent of STEM graduates globally, and their share shrinks in higher-technical fields: they account for only 30 percent in information and communication technology (ICT) and 28 percent in engineering and manufacturing.[43] Stereotypes and the lack of role models shape girls' confidence and interest in STEM early on, and gaps persist through higher education and into work.

Many countries have introduced policies aimed at reducing gender gaps in STEM. However, while 68 percent of countries support STEM education broadly, only about half of those policies explicitly target girls and women.[44]

Institutional bias in AI data and evaluation

The loss of female talent across STEM and ICT is particularly pronounced in AI: in 2024, women represented only 22 percent of AI professionals and under 14 percent of senior executives.[45]

Gender distribution of AI talent by seniority levels globally in 2024

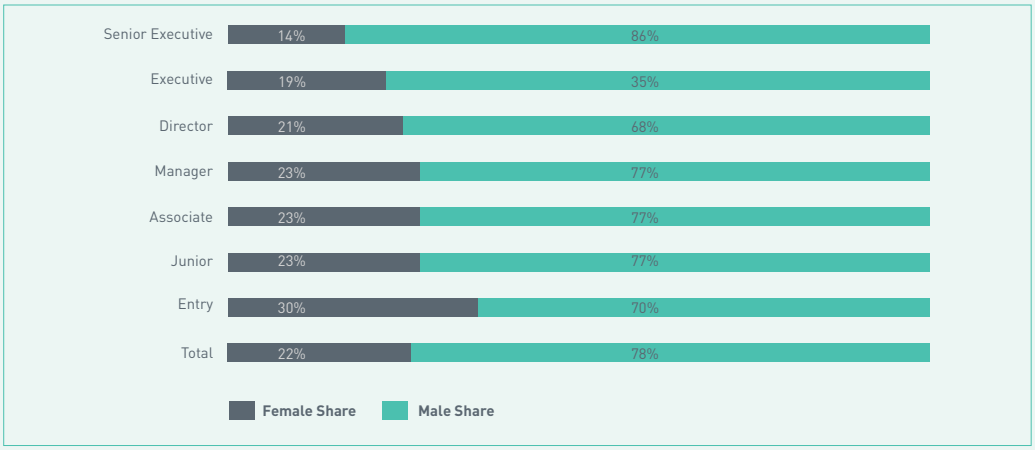


Figure 8: Gender distribution of AI talent by seniority levels globally in 2024.[46]
Source: Interface (2024).

This disparity embeds bias into system design: Homogeneous teams are more likely to select, label and validate data with male centered assumptions, so hiring tools trained on male heavy histories and unrepresentative clinical data may reproduce inequities.[47] In literature, this dynamic is described as "exclusion overhead," a phenomenon in which AI systems developed without ethical design principles fail to account for underrepresented groups.

Facial recognition often performs worse for women, especially for diverse ethnic groups, creating unequal burdens in screening and access.[48] Fragmented and uneven global governance leaves many jurisdictions without robust, enforceable mechanisms to prevent gender and racial bias or the reinforcement of discriminatory stereotypes in AI systems.[49]

OPPORTUNITIES

Economic growth via participation and productivity

Closing gender gaps in STEM and AI employment unlocks sizable GDP gains. The World Bank estimates more than 20 percent potential global GDP gains by 2050, and simulations for MENA show 34 to 53 percent per capita gains where gaps are widest.[50]

Benefits come from higher labor force participation and from diverse teams that improve product design, decision quality and model accuracy.[51]

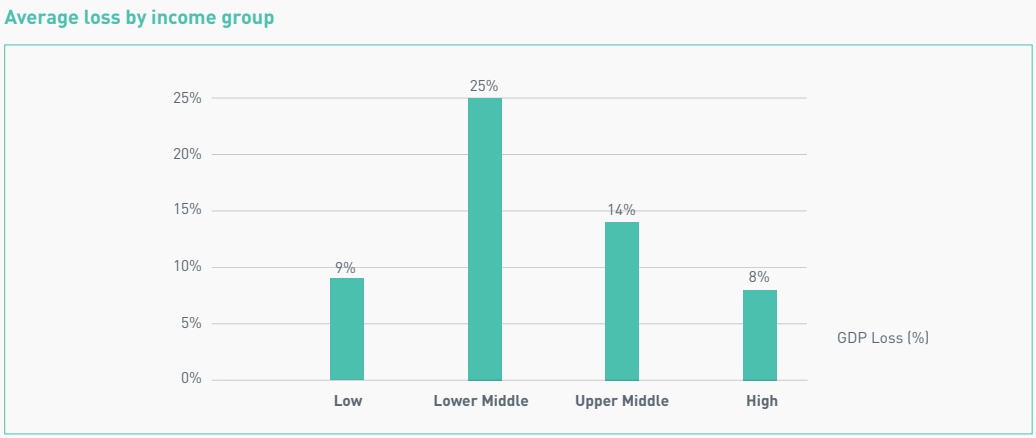


Figure 9: The loss in GDP per capita from gender gaps in education and labor force participation, 2020–2050. Author's simulations using LTGM (Long-Term Growth Model) and LTGM-TFP (Total Factor Productivity) extension.[52]
Source: Devadas & Kim (2021).

For economies like the UAE (United Arab Emirates), where women now constitute 61 percent of STEM graduates, exceeding regional averages, this represents captured upside: higher female talent in technical roles drives digital innovation capacity and improves workforce resilience in AI-intensive sectors.[53] This is also evident in firm-level outcomes: A study of manufacturing companies shows that organizations retaining women in technical roles over time generate higher levels of innovation and diversify their technological capabilities.[54] Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy explicitly targets women's STEM participation through scholarships and institutional partnerships. Evidently, the King Abdullah University achieves above global average 39 percent female STEM enrollment and 47 percent women graduates in KAUST Academy AI courses, signaling that intentional system redesign yields measurable results.[55]

System-level policy and institutional design

The Gulf States and North Africa have implemented institutionalized approaches to gender-inclusive STEM education and AI skills development. In early 2025, UNESCO and the Arab Educational Training Centre introduced two toolkits to help educators, institutions, and education stakeholders advance inclusive pedagogy and the use of AI in educational frameworks.[56] Saudi Arabia expanded programs for women through scholarships, mentorship and gender responsive curricula across universities.[57] The UAE National Program for Coders trained 100 Emirati women in AI and cybersecurity and set gender parity goals inside national technology strategies.[58]

Training models that link AI-Upskilling to employment opportunities

While education and policy reforms lay the foundation, closing gender gaps in AI can also benefit from delivery models that link upskilling with labor market access. Replicable models include the FAIR Forward AI & Data Science Bootcamp that combines intensive technical training with workplace readiness, entrepreneurship basics, and capstone projects.[59] Amazon's free AI courses and certification pathways similarly lower access barriers by removing cost constraints,[60] while digital-skills programs such as the Orange Digital Centers, provide inclusive training with AI modules and employment linkage through job fairs, internships and ecosystem partnerships.[61]

Chapter 5: Redefining leadership for systemic change

Embedding equity and accountability to reshape leadership norms and deliver fairer results

For decades, gender equity efforts targeted careers, not systems, leaving barriers intact. Lasting equity needs redesigning rules, incentives, and pathways to unlock talent, resilience, and fair, innovative leadership.

CHALLENGES

The sponsorship gap and leaky pipeline

Many careers still advance through opaque networks and informal sponsorship, which continue to disadvantage women. A recent McKinsey study finds that only 16 percent of entry level women in the Americas have a sponsor compared with 33 percent of men.[62] This limited access to networks reduces the visibility of board and management ready women to nominating committees and senior advocates, while the absence of role models and mentors further erodes confidence and slows career progression.[63]

These early disadvantages compound into a broader "leaky pipeline" in which female talent declines from education to executive levels. In STEM fields, the decline becomes visible already between graduation and workforce entry.[64] Insufficient representation of women in mid-level roles continue to weaken the pipeline for senior leadership.[65] The "broken rung" persists: in 2025, for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 93 women advanced, with even fewer promotions for women of color.[66]

The flexibility stigma

The post pandemic shift in work has surfaced a new gender bias called flexibility stigma. Employees, especially women, are viewed as less committed when they use flexible or remote work, even though evidence shows these models can improve productivity.[67] This stigma reflects a deeper design flaw in leadership that assumes workers have no caregiving duties. It overlooks the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, with women performing about 2.5 times more than men and in regions such as MENA and Western Asia more than four times.[68] This substantial externality creates an unlevel playing field.

OPPORTUNITIES

Flexibility models and care as enablers

Post-pandemic shifts in how work is organizedshow that systemic change accelerates progress. Flexible and hybrid practices have been key drivers of women's advancement into senior roles. Women hold larger shares of senior roles in hybrid models at 36 percent and in home-based models at 41 percent, compared with 33 percent in office-based settings. Notably, female-led businesses are more likely to adopt flexible and hybrid models, underscoring the importance of inclusive leadership in promoting equitable work practices.[69]

Impact of working practices on percentage of senior management roles held by women

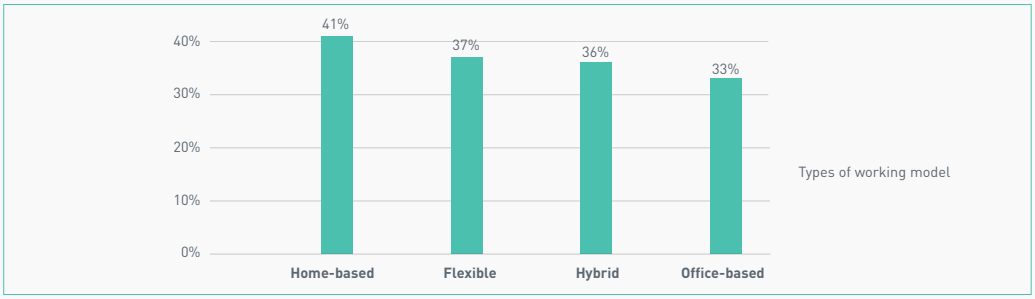


Figure 10: Impact of working practices on percentage of senior management roles held by women.[70]
Source: Grant Thornton (2024).

How the gender of the CEO affects the working model in 2024

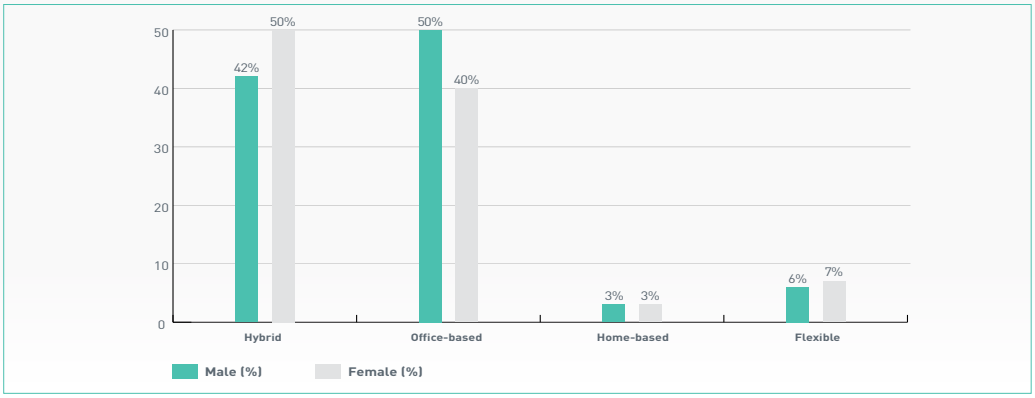


Figure 11: How the gender of the CEO affects the working model in 2024.[71]
Source: Grant Thornton (2024).

Public investment in childcare, early education and paid family leave can change incentives and boosts economic growth.[72] A study across 82 countries finds that each dollar invested in closing gaps in childcare-related leave and early childhood care and education (ECCE) could raise GDP by an average of 3.76 dollars by 2035.[73] Consistent with this, countries that invest more in pre-primary education tend to have fewer women outside the labor force due to caregiving responsibilities.[74]

Better outcomes through representation and early development

Following the example of flexible work models, it is evident that the true value of diversity is realized when women have an equal voice in leadership, leading to improved institutional outcomes.[75] In water utilities, the World Bank Equal Aqua program helped raise the share of women on boards from 16 to 24 percent and led to improving the sector's overall performance.[76] Similarly, advancing women into leadership positions can yield tangible organizational benefits: At Ashur International Bank in Iraq, promoting women to senior roles cut annual turnover from 14 percent to 2 percent and significantly improved employee satisfaction.[77]

Chapter 6: Leading inclusive foresight and crisis response

Driving forward-thinking strategies and breakthroughs that shape tomorrow's economies

We live amid cascading crises, pandemics, natural disasters, and economic shocks, where strategic foresight is essential. Yet excluding women from foresight and crisis management creates a structural vulnerability driving avoidable losses, failed aid, and flawed resilience.

CHALLENGES

The disproportionate impact of crisis on women

Crises consistently hit women hardest, compounding inequalities. During COVID 19, women held 39 percent of jobs but suffered 54 percent of job losses.[78] Unpaid care surged during lockdown, disproportionately affecting women, who already performed 2.5× more unpaid care and domestic work than men.[79] Government responses lagged: of 3,099 social protection and labor measures, only 12 percent targeted women's economic security and just 7 percent addressed rising care burdens.[80]

Total and average number of unpaid care work (UCW) measures by region

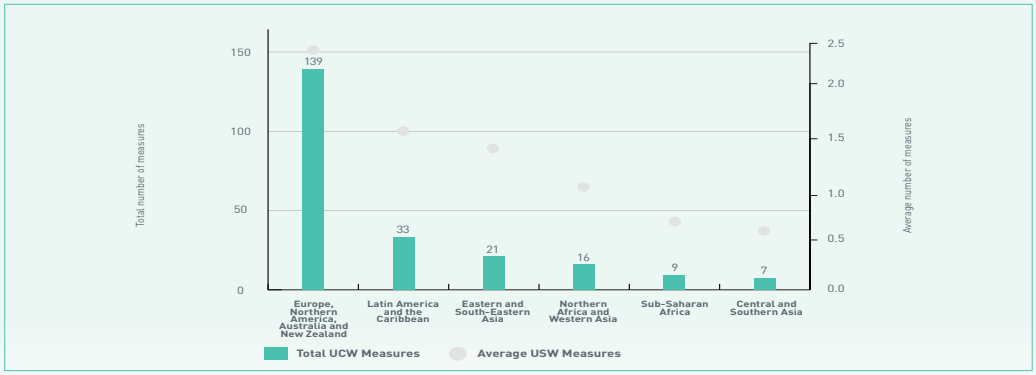


Figure 12: The global concentration of governmental measures on unpaid care work (UCW) was higher in high-income countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.[81]

Source: UN Women, & United Nations Development Programme (2022).

Representation gaps help explain these outcomes. Women comprised only 24 percent of global COVID 19 task force members, and 78 percent of task forces were led by men.[82]

Women's representation in COVID-19 task forces, by region

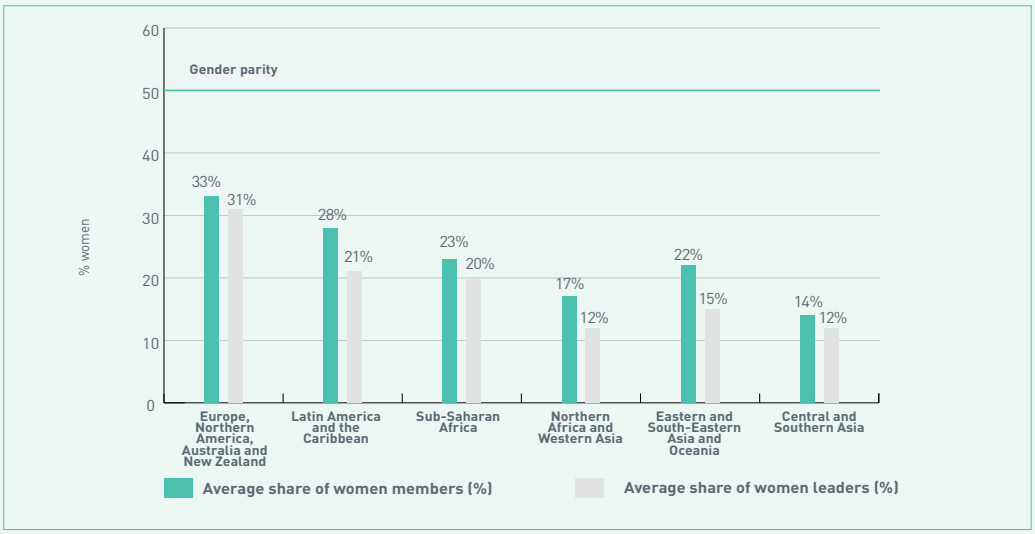


Figure 13: Women's representation in COVID-19 task forces, by region.[83]
Source: UN Women, & United Nations Development Programme (2022).

Notably, regions with higher female representation implemented more extensive care-related measures, suggesting a clear link between women's participation in decision-making and more equitable, care-sensitive crisis responses.

Ultimately, when women are better represented in leadership, crisis governance becomes more equitable and more responsive to a broad range of social needs.[84]

The foresight paradox: planning for the many with insight from a few

Strategic foresight remains led by a minority of the world it aims to prepare, with fewer than 20 percent of foresight institutes headed by women.[85] Underrepresentation produces blind spots, especially when gender disaggregated data is ignored. Policies can inadvertently penalize nonlinear careers (e.g., caregiving breaks), resulting in inequitable pension systems.[86] In technological and economic foresight, technical trends often eclipse social factors like gender norms and access. Agrifood foresight illustrates the issue: gender is the least examined outcome, and scenarios often assume uniform adoption.

As a result, projections for drought-resistant seeds ignore women farmers' limited credit, training, and extension support, producing overly optimistic forecasts and misallocated investment.[87] Consequences are also tangible in crisis response: aid frequently bypasses women in Japanese earthquakes;[88] evacuation centers often lacked privacy and separate sanitation facilities.[89] When future architects share a narrow worldview, they miss the distinct risks faced by marginalized groups and the solutions these groups can provide.

OPPORTUNITIES

Diverse foresight for future investments

Diverse foresight teams produce more accurate, investable and inclusive scenarios. Accounting for gender dynamics turns foresight from prediction into transformation. Evidence from agrifood shows that closing gaps in girls' education, land rights and finance can accelerate poverty reduction, food security and climate resilience. Modeling the multiplier effects of girls' education and women's labor force participation reveals pathways to higher GDP and greater resilience, opportunities that conventional models often miss.[90]

The tangible impact of women's leadership

Women's leadership delivers measurable gains before, during, and after crises. In Vanuatu (2021), investing in women leaders improved the resilience of schools and vulnerable communities after Cyclone Pam.[91] Local women's networks function as large scale logistical and financial platforms: in India, the World Bank supported JEEViKA program organized 12+ million women into self-help groups that, during COVID 19, produced 168 million masks, ran thousands of community kitchens, and helped deliver over $2.3 billion in aid, driving local recovery.[92] In North Kordofan, Sudan, environmental stressors opened space for women to mediate natural resource disputes, roles previously reserved for men.[93] Sociologists describe women as "inherently practicing futurists," continually planning for needs overlooked by formal systems.[94]

Recommended actions

Achieving gender equity at scale requires coordinated, system-level action that reshapes finance, policy, innovation, human capital, leadership, and foresight. The following recommendations outline a comprehensive blueprint to strengthen accountability, expand pathways, and embed inclusion across institutions and ecosystems.

Mandate Enforceable Accountability and Parity in Leadership

Organizations and governments must move beyond voluntary commitments and adopt enforceable mechanisms that drive measurable progress on gender equity. This includes integrating gender-diversity requirements into due-diligence processes, setting public targets, and linking senior leadership incentives to demonstrable outcomes. At the same time, binding parity rules across political parties, elected bodies, and senior public administration ensure that women's leadership becomes a normalized standard rather than an exception.

Scale blended finance and monetize gender co-benefits

Scaling capital toward women requires both expanded financing tools and new incentive structures. Blended-finance models, which are already effective in mobilizing private capital into women-led sectors, should be scaled to close persistent gaps, especially in underserved markets. This transforms gender equity from a moral aspiration into a measurable, investable economic asset.

Integrate gender-responsive budgeting and policy standards

Governments should mainstream gender-responsive budgeting into every stage of fiscal planning, from strategy to execution. This includes gender impact assessments and gender budget tags, that reward organizations advancing gender equity. These measures transform budgeting and procurement from passive compliance tools into active levers for structural change, aligning resource allocation with inclusive governance principles.

Transform universities into engines of inclusive innovation

Universities hold the power to spark lifelong innovation pathways when they combine rigorous learning with hands-on experimentation. Embedding entrepreneurial programs, interdisciplinary challenge studios, and access to emerging technologies empower women to move from idea to impact early in their careers. These environments cultivate confidence, problem-solving skills, and networks that carry forward into the startup landscape.

Build connected, inclusive innovation ecosystems

Women founders thrive when they have access to shared labs, incubators, co-creation spaces, and industry testbeds. Connecting universities with innovation hubs, accelerators, investors, and corporate R&D creates continuous learning, reduces time-to-market, and grounds innovation in community needs. A strong opportunity would be a National Women's Innovation Forum in Abu Dhabi, which convenes ministers, CEOs, technical leaders, investors, and innovators to break silos and create direct pathways for deployment.

Link upskilling to real career pathways

Upskilling must shift from short term training to integrated pathways connected to tangible employment. Programs should combine technical certification with mentoring, internships, industry exposure, and clear progression routes into technical, managerial, and research roles. Training programs must be flexible and accessible for caregivers and prepare male colleagues and managers to support women in male dominated settings, including remote sites. Skills based hiring, blind recruitment mechanisms, and transparent promotion pathways help mitigate bias and expand access.

Mandate gender responsive AI governance

Policymakers must expand action beyond STEM education and embed gender-responsive AI design principles across the full AI lifecycle. AI systems should be validated through standardized data governance protocols, bias testing, and inclusive evaluation methods that incorporate the experiences of vulnerable groups. This includes multi-stakeholder working groups that integrate civil society organizations and vulnerable groups to ensure inclusive oversight and continuous accountability.[95] National AI strategies should commit to gender equity, set affirmative action targets and indicators, and require gender parity in AI committees and boards.[96]

Reengineer governance and accountability

Informal decision-making networks should be replaced with transparent and diverse bodies that use clear criteria for promotions and appointments. Representation targets and regulatory measures should be tied to real authority, such as profit-and-loss responsibility and strategic decision rights, rather than symbolic roles. Measurement systems should track belonging, decision influence, promotion speed, and post-parental-leave retention in addition to headcounts. These metrics should be embedded in leadership goals and performance reviews so that progress is rewarded alongside operational outcomes.

Integrate a work and ecosystem design that enables participation at scale

Work systems should be designed to reflect caregiving realities by making flexibility the default and using outcomes-based performance standards to remove flexibility stigma. Employees who use flexible arrangements should not be disadvantaged in promotion or evaluation. Participation should be expanded through public and private investment in affordable childcare, early education, and paid family leave. Quota-style tools, when supported by implementation and monitoring, can increase representation and prompt organizational adaptation.

Build women's strategic leadership and capacity

Shift from tokenism to sustained investment across foresight, peacebuilding, and crisis governance. Create leadership pipelines, targeted training, and inclusive capacity-building that engages men as allies to transform culture.A replicable model exists: UN Women's Strategic Plan 2022–2025 dedicates over one-third of resources to women's leadership in peace and disaster resilience, demonstrating how long-term investment can translate into durable institutional change and more effective crisis response.[97]

Conclusion

Transformative growth requires redesigning the systems that shape capital, policy, innovation, talent, leadership, and long-term planning. Inclusion is not separate from growth; it is what makes economies resilient and adaptive. Across finance, governance, innovation, human capital, leadership, and foresight, a consistent insight emerges: systems perform better when they are designed to reflect the full diversity of talent, experience, and decision-making power. Inclusive systems allocate resources more efficiently, anticipate risks earlier, and scale solutions more effectively.

The real constraint leaders face today is not a lack of data or proof, but the gap between isolated initiatives and genuine system-wide change.

What happens next depends on leadership choices. Institutions must rewire incentives, embed accountability, and scale proven models that unlock inclusive performance. These choices will determine whether economies merely respond to disruption or actively shape a more resilient future. Inclusive pathways are essential and the moment to shift from commitment to consequence is now.

List of abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
ETCGS	Arab Educational Training Centre for the Gulf States
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSO	Chief Sustainability Officer
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
ECCE	Childcare-related leave and early childhood care and education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPs	General Partners
HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILPA	Institutional Limited Partners Association
JEEViKA	State-led rural livelihoods program in Bihar, India
KAUST	King Abdullah University of Science and Technology
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LPs	Limited Partners
LTGM	Long-Term Growth Model
MENA	Middle East and Northern Africa
PE	Private Equity
P&L	Profit & Loss
R&D	Research & Development

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
ROI	Return on Investment
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TFP	Total Factor Productivity
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCW	Unpaid Care Work
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
WRD	Women's Resilience to Disasters

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wiser@masdar.ae
wiser.ae
wiser.masdar
WiSER Network