



5. Gender-sensitive product design and market research

Does your organization have a balanced proportion of users across genders, or is it disproportionately serving men or women users? Even if the total user base composition is a balanced 50-50%, are women or men typically using, experiencing, and benefiting from your product/ service in different ways? How does your organization ensure equitable access, usability, relevance and affordability of your product/ service for individuals of all genders?



What do we mean by gender-sensitive product design and market research?

Gender-sensitive product design and market research refers to the deliberate integration of gender-specific perspectives and considerations throughout the development processes for a new product/ service. By adopting a gender-inclusive approach, organizations strive to create products, services, and experiences that resonate, are meaningful and relevant with individuals of all genders, ensuring equitable access, usability, and satisfaction across diverse user demographics.

Why does gender-insensitive product design and market research happen?

Gender biases often have a lot of weight in product design. A study by the UK Design Council found that while women make up 63% of art and design graduates, only an estimated 5% hold practising industrial designer positions [1]. This lack of diversity can lead to products unconsciously designed with a man in mind. For example, personal protective equipment (PPE) is often based on men's body size and strength, leaving women with ill-fitting gear that can be unsafe and hinder performance [2]. Similarly, voice assistants, often developed by men-dominated teams, can have difficulty recognizing women's voices and may be biased toward men's preferences in search results [3]. This bias often occurs because design teams lack a comprehensive understanding of user demographics and fail to consider the needs of all genders. Instead, they may instinctively design products based on their own experiences and preferences. Furthermore, feedback loops from early-stage product testing platforms can exacerbate the problem. For example, on platforms like Product Hunt, where 90% of users are men, early feedback is often skewed [4]. As a result, products created by women entrepreneurs – who may be addressing the needs of women – are less likely to receive valuable feedback or be properly appreciated by the man-predominant user base. This biased sampling can cause innovations targeted at women to be undervalued or disregarded, leading to a marketplace where gender-specific needs are often overlooked.

Why is gender-sensitive product design and market research important?

By incorporating diverse perspectives, companies can identify and rectify oversights that may otherwise go unnoticed. For example, studies indicate that women are 47% more likely to suffer serious injuries in car crashes compared to men because car safety features have historically been less effective for women due to anatomical differences [5]. Similarly, research reported significant disparities in facial recognition software accuracy, with error rates higher for women and people of colour [6]. Even public facilities are not free from gender bias in their design. For example, on average, the queue is longer for women's public toilets despite providing equal floor space as for men's toilets. However, the design doesn't consider that men's toilets can serve more people at once (thanks to the urinals), and women usually require longer usage due to additional needs, such as menstruation or accompanying children [7]. Finally, this lack of gender-inclusive research design also has significant economic implications. In financial services, for example, women represent one of the largest underserved customer groups.

By tailoring products and services to better meet women's needs, companies can also significantly boost their performance. Analysis shows that banks could generate an additional

[1] <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/Design%2520Perspectives-%2520Design%2520Skills.pdf>

[2] <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/PPEandwomenguidance.pdf>

[3] https://ssir.org/books/excerpts/entry/sounds_like_me

[4] <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28882>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

[6] <https://ainowinstitute.org/publication/discriminating-systems-gender-race-and-power-in-ai-2>

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

USD65b from mortgages and credit approvals if women were treated the same as men, while insurers could gain USD500b and wealth managers could capture USD25b in fees by aligning their offerings with women clients' needs as effectively as they do for men clients [8]. Thus, inclusive design not only helps organizations better understand their target audience but also serves as one of the most powerful drivers for improved performance and sales. Additionally, it enhances brand reputation and recognition by positioning the company as an inclusive and forward-thinking leader in its industry.

How does one conduct gender-sensitive product design and market research?

One of the easiest ways to rebalance one's clients/users base, and hence boost acquisition with previously under-targeted segments, is to apply gender-sensitive research and design. Fortunately, there are many easy steps to make that process more inclusive and less biased. These include:

1. **Inclusive research:** Engage diverse focus groups representing different genders, ages, abilities, and cultural backgrounds to gather comprehensive insights. You can consider partnering with organizations that specialize in diversity or gender equality as they can provide valuable insights and access to target users who may otherwise be overlooked in the research process. Collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data to understand unique needs and preferences.
2. **Implement gender-sensitive language in surveys and user research:** When designing surveys, interviews, or user research tools, use gender-sensitive and inclusive language. Avoid assumptions about gender roles and offer multiple options for gender identification. For example, instead of using only binary options like "man" or "woman", include options such as "non-binary" or "prefer not to say." Additionally, tailor questions to explore gender-specific experiences where relevant. This approach ensures that the data collected accurately reflects the experiences of all users.
3. **Diverse prototyping:** During the prototyping stage, test products with a wide range of user groups. You can for instance create representative personas that reflect a wide variety of demographics, such as gender identity, ability, age, and cultural background. These personas can help simulate real-world scenarios and identify potential design flaws or exclusions in products, ensuring they meet the needs of all users.
4. **Seek feedback from socio-demographically representative early adopters:** When gathering user feedback, ensure that your test audience reflects the demographics of your potential target market, particularly for underrepresented groups like women, people of colour, or rural consumers. Relying on platforms or channels dominated by a particular demographic, such as men, may skew early feedback and lead to overlook the preferences of key users. If necessary, explore alternative channels or create focus groups to ensure feedback accurately represents your target audience.
5. **Monitor adoption and usage:** At the product launch, actively monitor for gender imbalances in adoption rates, purchasing patterns, and user engagement. Use this data to adjust product features to better cater to underrepresented groups.

[8] <https://www.oliverwyman.com/our-expertise/insights/2020/mar/needed-more-women-with-power/collection-of-articles/why-ignoring-women-is-costing-financial-services-money.html>

6. **Responsive customer service:** Track complaints and feedback in a way that is disaggregated by gender, to detect any disparities in user experience. Implement targeted solutions to address specific issues faced by different user groups.

How to measure progress and success?

Through our own, [LeFil's research](#), we identified a number of metrics that can be improved through gender-focused initiatives, and which are meaningful to track as you progress with the implementation of your efforts. For some of these metrics, we provide a benchmark value, which is the average that close to 100 ventures like yours recorded after having worked on this topic. These metrics are:

Metric	Benchmark
Proportion of men/ women among customers/ users/ end beneficiaries	40% of women
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary satisfaction	81%
Proportion of women customers/ users/ end beneficiaries who feel empowered by your product/ service	62%
Annual growth rate in earned revenue	71%
Annual percentage increase in number of customers/ users/ end beneficiaries	81% [9]
Staff satisfaction	82%
Staff productivity	N/A
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary acquisition costs	N/A
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary turnover rate	N/A
Amount of yearly investment/ funding raised thanks to/ for your gender work	N/A
Proportion of staff trained in gender mainstreaming	59%

[9] With outlier. without outlier 154%

Case studies



Designing a gender-sensitive STEM curriculum by 1bot

1bot revised its STEM curriculum for primary school children, to make it more engaging and effective for girls, including language, visuals, but also choice and design of the exercises.

1bot is a social enterprise from Guatemala that wants to revolutionize STEM education. It offers an online curriculum and robot kits to teach school children about STEM topics, along with improving their problem-solving, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship abilities, while working on a robot and online exercises.

1bot's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop, and realized that its venture was actually perpetuating the digital divide. Indeed, in Guatemala only 10% of STEM students are women, as science and technology are still perceived as masculine career paths. Among 1bot's students, around 40% of users were girls. When the team looked at its teaching material, it realized that not only the language and visuals were mainly targeting boys, but that the whole process was gender-biased, starting from the way the exercises were conceived, the choice of examples, etc. Hence, 1bot decided to revamp all of its content, and its content production process, to attract more girls to scientific careers, as well as grow its user base. To do so, 1bot:

- hired an expert to help create a gender-bias-free curriculum, in terms of visuals, content, examples, exercises, and methodology. In particular, the expert helped develop checklists to review the material with regards to language, accessibility, images and didactic
- re-designed its existing materials in collaboration with a women artists' collective
- lobbied the Ministry of Education for the formal adoption of this revamped curriculum, so that 1bot's material would become the first nationally endorsed STEM curriculum for young students in the country.

In terms of impact, with its new, gender-inclusive curriculum, the share of women students taking 1bot courses increased to 58%. The interest of women students (and their parents) for STEM careers also climbed from 30% to 76% after taking the course. 1bot's sales to schools doubled in the year that followed, as these efforts led to the team signing an official cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Education in Guatemala, resulting in an endorsement of 1bot's material as regular class material, rather than extracurricular content. This way, 1bot became the first and so far only government-endorsed, gender-inclusive STEM curriculum provider in the country! Finally, its distinctive positioning on the market allowed 1bot to attract investment from corporations and regional financial institutions such as IADB, which will finance its offering for up to 10,000 children in the coming years. Therefore, making its curriculum gender-inclusive not only increased the proportion of women users and led to renewed girls' interest in STEM careers, but also brought multiple long-term benefits to the social enterprise, such as accelerated sales and facilitated access to investment. The journey did not stop there, however. After revising its curriculum, 1bot's team also had a look at its

communication and promotional material, to remove all biases and become more appealing to girls and their parents on its B2C channel. The venture also shared its curriculum with a fellow social enterprise in Bolivia, also promoting STEM education in its market, so that the impact of gender-smart education could spread further across the region.



Improving women's employability by Disruptia

Disruptia increased the employability rate of its women students by designing a tailored training that addressed their specific needs. Disruptia did not only aim at improving its students' satisfaction, retention and success rates, but also at enhancing its own positioning on the head-hunting market, and hence increasing its sales.

Disruptia is an educational company in Colombia that aims to decrease the skills gap between young talent and the job market. It focuses on youth who are somehow excluded or face barriers in accessing employment opportunities (e.g. lower socio-economic segments, ethnic minorities, etc.), and trains them on various topics and skill sets, such as sales and customer service, digital marketing and software development. It also strengthens its students' soft skills, like growth mindset, company culture, social-emotional skills for work, and CV and interview skills. After the training, Disruptia connects the students with interested companies that have job vacancies, which pay Disruptia for its talent search services.

Disruptia's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop and realized that, while the participation across all its trainings was heavily skewed toward women students (82% women vs 18% men), the employability rate for women students was much lower than for men students (41% vs 92% in 2022). It also realized that women faced higher and different obstacles in entering the job market than men. Thus, Disruptia decided to drill into the specific needs and requirements of its women students, and adapt its training content and process accordingly, to ensure a higher success rate among students, and ultimately increase sales and satisfaction with the employers. To do so, Disruptia:

- identified barriers to women's employability and job retention through various diagnostics. The specific barriers identified included: lack of connectivity, lack of access to a computer to study and work, caregiving burden, low skills and self-confidence during the selection process, lack of outfit to go to work, and lack of cash for food at work and transportation to work, among others
- designed and implemented a personalized coaching track called "Mujeres Adelante", including follow-up calls and messages, personalized record-keeping, support with CV and interviews, LinkedIn profile creation, information about labour legislation, etc.
- trained partner hiring companies on gender mainstreaming to sensitize them further on gender equity and inclusion.

With these changes, Disruptia was able to increase employability for women across all its programs by 52% (from 41% to 93%) in 2023. Drop-out rates from women students in its programs decreased from 37% to 8% (and from 20% to 4% for men students) between 2022 and 2023. Its net promotor score among women students also grew from 87 to 93 (and from 84 to 92 for among students) over the same period. But Disruptia's efforts did not stop there. Inspired by this success, the team decided to integrate gender into the design and delivery of all its services. Now every program includes gender-focused content. It also developed a new virtual sales and customer service course specifically for women. As a result of all these efforts, from 2022 to 2023 Disruptia increased its sales by more than 500% and grew its partnerships by 50%.



Involving women in agricultural production by earth-IoT

earth-IoT facilitated the integration of women in the agricultural production chain by helping women producers set up seedling greenhouses and market their products within their communities.

earth-IoT is an agro-tech company which designs equipment for real-time measurement and monitoring of soil, water, and crop conditions for small and medium-sized producers in Mexico. It also provides advisory and training to farmers and agricultural cooperatives to help them digitalize their production, monitor field performance, and ultimately enhance crop yield. Thanks to these services, producers can save on water, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs, which allows them to increase their income by up to 50%.

earth-IoT's team took part in our [Gender Mainstreaming Workshop](#) and realized that it had a significant gender imbalance in its client base, with only 8% of its clients being women, representing a 45% client loss for the company. This disparity was largely driven by the subordinate status typically held by women farmers in the agricultural production chain. In local rural communities, women's role is mainly confined to family duties and caregiving responsibilities, relegating them to a secondary role in production and making them economically dependent on men family members. Thus, earth-IoT designed an initiative to encourage women to actively and profitably participate in the agricultural production chain, with the aim to increase the share of women clients actively involved in production from 0% to 4%, and grow its client portfolio by 5%. To do so, earth-IoT:

- conducted an initial assessment to identify concrete opportunities to integrate women in the production chain. Through discussions with producers and their families, the team
- identified seedling planting as a promising untapped economic opportunity that could be led by women
- supported women of producer families in setting up small greenhouses where they could grow tree seedlings to sell within their community. In particular, earth-IoT helped the women with crop planning, purchase of materials, and greenhouse construction. It also

helped them find technical and organizational solutions to make the agricultural activities compatible with the women's caregiving responsibilities

- developed guidance manuals for system assembly and crop production in a non-technical language that could be well understood by target communities
- pursued alliances with institutions and private companies to replicate and expand this initiative.

Through this initiative, earth-IoT empowered women producers, enhancing their confidence and satisfaction for being able to generate income independently. The company increase its share of women clients by 16% (from 8% to 23%), while its total client base grew by 163% (from 52 to 137 producers). The company also achieved a 170% revenue increase. However, earth-IoT's efforts did not stop there: the company is in discussion with potential funders to replicate the initiative in another region, and with a local university to train students to support implementation in the field.



Closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship by Ecubi

Ecubi empowered women entrepreneurs by providing tailored training and support with a gender focus, to help them overcome the bigger barriers they face in running their business.

Ecubi offers technology solutions for small businesses in Mexico and Colombia, including software for business management, e-commerce, logistics as well as professional training modules. Through its offerings, Ecubi helps small businesses improve efficiency, increase sales, and improve customer satisfaction.

Ecubi's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop, and realized that its women clients faced bigger challenges in achieving business success. An internal study conducted in Azcapotzalco (Mexico) revealed that 60% of women entrepreneurs face cultural barriers and gender stereotypes that hindered their access to financing and mentors, and only 30% receive adequate financing for their business. To alleviate this imbalance, Ecubi developed an initiative to provide gender-sensitive entrepreneurship training to local women entrepreneurs, to help them strengthen their business, while at the same time expanding its own product and client portfolio. To do so, Ecubi:

- partnered with a local university to design a comprehensive training program addressing the needs of small businesses, particularly women-led ones, on topics such as business management, digital marketing, technology, gender perspective and entrepreneurial skills
- delivered the training both in-person and online, to provide maximum flexibility to program participants; the formal training was complemented by personalized mentorship and advisory sessions, to offer concrete guidance on the participants' specific challenges

- engaged local authorities in a promotional event to showcase the initiative and the participating entrepreneurs
- provided free access to its business management software for selected program participants, partly sponsored by the partner university.

Through this initiative, Ecubi successfully trained 565 participants, of which 412 women, and distributed 200 free software subscriptions. As a result, the participating entrepreneurs increased their sales by an estimated 5%, and benefited from an increased sense of community and mutual support (e.g. creation of WhatsApp groups to help each other on common topics such as recommending suppliers, finding customers, etc.). On the business side, Ecubi attracted new partnerships and increased its revenue by 178%. Additionally, the initiative contributed to positioning Ecubi as an agent of social and economic change and a leader in promoting equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs. For the venture, the gender perspective has ceased to be simply an additional component, and has become a central focus in the planning and execution of all its activities.