1. Gender-focused programming, financing and positioning for ESOs

Do your organization's mission statement and strategic plan include an explicit focus on promoting gender diversity, whether you aim to do this within your own team, when designing new programs, or when selecting participants? If so, do you communicate this focus consistently and clearly in a way that is distinctive? Do you seek to leverage this focus to fundraise for your programs and participants in a way that intentionally puts inclusion and diversity forward?

What do we mean by gender-focused programming, financing and positioning?

Gender-focused programming, financing and positioning refers to an approach in which entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) intentionally set strategic priorities, design programs, fundraise, and allocate resources in ways that recognize and respond to gender disparities in the entrepreneurship space.

These disparities exist in terms of access (e.g., women typically have less access to funding, training, and networks than men), but also in terms of constraints, preferences, and incentives (e.g., how women organize their work-life balance, build teams and companies, what motivates them, etc.). Addressing these differences can be done in many ways, such as developing programs for earlier-stage businesses, focusing on sectors which see a higher proportion of women entrepreneurs, designing support packages that offer resources which are typically scarce for women entrepreneurs (such as peer networks or smaller, unrestricted funding), or emphasizing topics which women value more (e.g., how to overcome investor skepticism when pitching, or how to build value-driven teams). Program delivery can also be remodeled to account for the greater constraints that women entrepreneurs typically face (e.g., cannot be long away from work/home, require flexible hours), but also their unique preferences (e.g., coaching support from role models they can relate with). Lastly, a lot can be done in terms of program participants' scouting, selection, and enrollment by understanding the structural exclusion factors that women entrepreneurs face (e.g., typically outside of mainstream investment and entrepreneurship-related circles) and also rethinking selection criteria. In a nutshell, gender-focused programming, financing and positioning integrates gender considerations into organizational and programmatic strategy, fundraising, budgeting, communication and outreach, cohort selection, program delivery, as well as monitoring and reporting. It aims to ensure that an ESO effectively creates equitable entrepreneurial opportunities, rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

Why is it hard to deliver gender-focused programming, financing and positioning?

The lack of gender focus in ESO organizations and programs often stems from the assumption that a so-called "neutral", one-size-fits-all approach produces neutral outcomes. This assumption is misleading, given that many ESOs rely on traditional modus operandi that have been shaped by mainstream entrepreneurship and finance ecosystems, which are historically better suited for and predominantly led by men. As a result, ESOs often mirror the same structural biases observed in the broader financial and entrepreneurial sectors, where, for instance, women-led small and medium enterprises face a US$1.6 trillion credit shortfall globally (US$93 billion in Latin America and the Caribbean alone) . Gender biases, male-dominated ESOs, limited gender-disaggregated data and insights, and funding models that prioritize scale over equity [1] all further contribute to reproducing approaches that appear gender-neutral but ultimately perpetuate exclusion. Against this backdrop, delivering gender-focused programming, financing and positioning requires ESOs to move beyond inherited models and make deliberate and meaningful choices to actively shape more inclusive entrepreneurial systems.

Why are gender-focused programming, financing and positioning important?

Gender-focused programming, financing and positioning are critical because they directly address the structural barriers that prevent women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs from fully participating in and benefiting from entrepreneurial ecosystems.

[1] https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2022/closing-the-gender-finance-gap-through-blended-finance

By rethinking program design, delivery, resource allocation, and financing, ESOs can move beyond inherited, one-size-fits-all models and better respond to the differentiated realities faced by women and gender-diverse entrepreneurs.

This, in turn, influences financing choices and opportunities. When ESOs partner with program funders and backers that explicitly value gender equity, they are better able to allocate funding and support in ways that reflect differentiated needs (e.g., offering more flexible support or targeted subsidies for mentoring and peer networking). Last but not least, this approach also enhances overall program performance: diverse cohorts not only improve learning dynamics, but also generate stronger innovation and economic outcomes for participants [2]. Ultimately, gender-focused programming, financing and positioning strengthen the effectiveness and impact of ESOs by ensuring that the support offered reaches the entrepreneurs in ways that are appropriate and effective for them, thereby contributing to more inclusive and resilient economic growth.

How does one implement gender-focused programming, financing and positioning?

To ensure your program is truly gender-sensitive, focus on the following levels of intervention and key implementation steps.

Start with the strategic level, by outlining your organization's key priorities, objectives, and focus in terms of gender mainstreaming, for your organization and programs. This will also help you define your core positioning towards participants, partners, and funders. More specifically:

1. **Position gender as a core value of your ESO:** Integrating gender considerations into your ESO's strategy strengthens your commitment to inclusive impact. To do so, explore what you should, can, and want to improve and commit to, in terms of gender inclusion, at 4 levels: within your own organization, in program participants' selection, in terms of support design and training content, and finally in terms of program delivery. This can be done through collecting and analyzing data about past programs, seeking feedback from participants, and scouting for new perspectives among partners and funders. To learn more, see our Gender assessment questionnaire for ESOs. Once your priorities are identified and articulated, set objectives and outline a strategy to reach those effectively.
   Crucially, this includes recognizing that gender disparities affect not only access to funding, training, and networks, but also, more pragmatically, how entrepreneurs manage, e.g., their work-life balance, build teams, and define success. Given that applying a gender lens is an extensive exercise, start with practical and feasible steps, and focus on aspects that could immediately make a difference for your team and participants. More can always be done over time.
   In practice, your priorities could involve: improving the gender balance of your team and introducing gender-sensitive HR policies, such as a caregiver policy or an extended maternal leave policy (to learn more, see our resource #3: Staff and leadership diversity); improving how participants are scouted, selected, and enrolled, including adjusting target audience (e.g., by prioritizing earlier-stage businesses or focusing on sectors with higher participation of women entrepreneurs), outreach channels, and selection criteria to

[2] https://www.v4w.org/uploads/documents/Journey-Destination-SB-Report-August-8.pdf

account for the structural exclusion many women entrepreneurs face (to learn more, see our resource #5: Gender-inclusive venture selection); or adapting program design and delivery to better reflect women entrepreneurs' constraints and preferences, for example through designing support packages that offer resources that women entrepreneurs disproportionately lack (such as peer networks, smaller and more flexible funding, or tailored content on topics like overcoming investor bias or building values-driven teams or through delivery with flexible schedules, hybrid formats, or mentorship from relatable role models (to learn more, see our resource #4: Gender-sensitive program design and delivery).

2. **Leverage communication to position your ESO externally:** To signal your intentionality and focus, make sure to review key communication, positioning, and public materials (e.g., website, fundraising documentation, events, partnerships, reports, etc.). The objective here is not only to add more specific language and examples about gender inclusion but also to give particular attention to whether messaging relies on highly competitive or elite founder narratives, reinforces stereotypes, or leverages communication channels that cater to (mostly male) entrepreneurs already well embedded in mainstream startup and investment circles (to learn more, see our resource #5: Gender-inclusive venture selection).

Then consider with whom you raise funding for your programs, and how you allocate these resources. More specifically:

3. **Analyze the proportion of your funders that value gender equity and strengthen alignment with them:** Assess the extent to which your current funders value or prioritize gender equity, and identify where stronger alignment could unlock more strategic, long-term partnerships. This includes understanding which funders actively seek gender-intentional programs, what evidence or commitments they expect, and how gender objectives are reflected in funding criteria and reporting requirements. Such analysis helps clarify where gender commitments are already supported, and where misalignment may limit ambition or follow-through.
4. **Actively engage and attract gender-equity-aligned funders:** Based on this assessment, ESOs can proactively engage both existing and prospective funders whose priorities align with their gender commitments. This may involve targeting new funding partners, adapting value propositions, and communicating gender objectives more systematically and consistently across fundraising materials, proposals, and reporting. Over time, strengthening alignment with gender-equity-oriented funders can enable more resources and/or more flexible, intentional, and sustainable approaches to gender-focused programming, financing and positioning.
5. **Analyze how programmatic resources are distributed:** Map the distribution of programmatic resources across different programs, support types, and participant groups in order to identify gender-based imbalances in how financial and non-financial support is allocated. This includes examining how resources are distributed across founders of different genders, trainers and mentors, and program components that may be more relevant to certain groups. Such analysis helps surface whether staff time, coaching and mentoring hours, funding, visibility in events, or access to follow-on opportunities are implicitly concentrated around profiles that favor one gender. Where imbalances are identified, reflect on whether these patterns result from deliberate strategic choices or from default assumptions and legacy program structures, and explore how to rebalance resources to better align with stated gender objectives.

Lastly, lasting improvements and change only come when your organization follows through by setting clear gender-related targets, tracking progress, and keeping oneself accountable by looking at results regularly, and communicating transparently about them. More specifically:

6. **Establish clear targets and metrics:** Anchor your gender commitment with clear, measurable targets and metrics. At the organizational level, targets may relate to diversity and inclusion within teams involved in program design and delivery (e.g., representation of women in leadership and senior roles; gender balance across staff functions; diversity among trainers, mentors, and service providers), as well as enabling conditions for equitable progression of team members (e.g., pay equity, formal promotion and performance processes, inclusive workplace policies). At the program participant level, targets should capture both participation and experience (e.g., share of women founders or owners, of women in senior management and in the workforce of participating ventures; attendance, completion rates, milestone achievement, and satisfaction across genders). At the participants' impact level, targets may extend to the gender inclusion outcomes achieved through supported participants themselves (e.g., proportion of women among ventures' customers, users, or suppliers; satisfaction or empowerment of women end beneficiaries of ventures; selected indicators of job quality or workforce equity within participating ventures). To learn more, see our resource #2: Gender-related program target setting. Ensure these targets are reflected in your strategy and outreach materials.
7. **Strengthen reporting and accountability mechanisms:** Build a clear system to track these targets and related metrics, and ensure regular reporting to your team, partners, and funders. To reinforce accountability, ensure that reported results are widely and systematically shared among the team, leadership and board, and review processes to ensure that insights stemming from reporting inform decisions and follow-up actions. Consistent tracking and reporting practices (e.g., using set periods, metrics, and formats) also support comparability and learning. Finally, document your progress, highlight your impact story, and clearly outline how you plan to further meet your stated targets. Transparency and consistency will enhance your ESO's credibility and attract more funders and strategic partnerships.