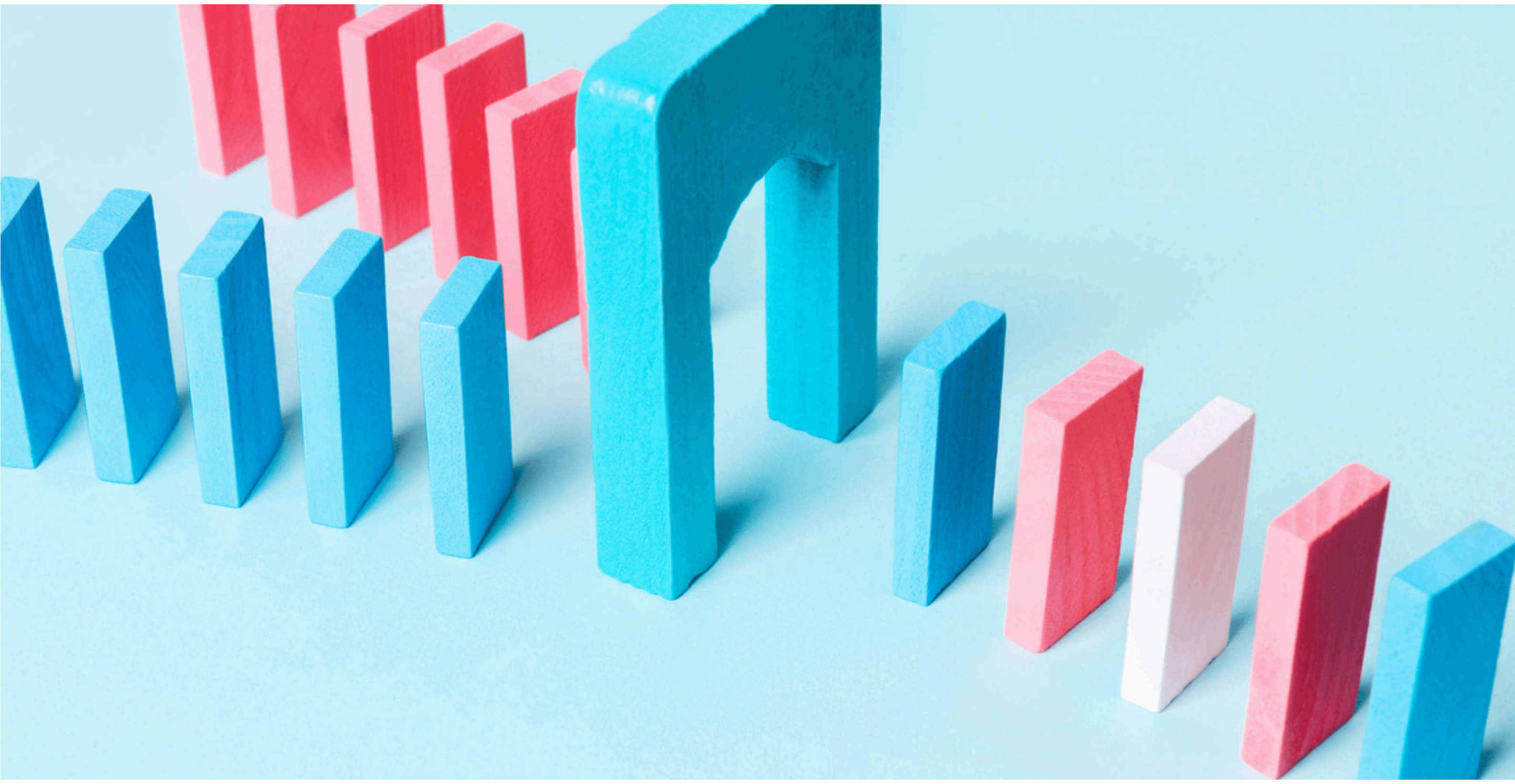
4. Gender-sensitive program design and delivery for ESOs

What if your accelerator or incubator program, while effective for some, is unintentionally less relevant or effective for others? Could your program, designed with the best intentions, be better suited for one gender, while missing out on the full potential of a fully-empowered, diverse cohort? And what opportunities are you losing by not addressing the unique needs of all your participants?



What do we mean by gender-sensitive program design and delivery?

Entrepreneurial support organization (ESO) programs help ventures build, validate, and scale their organizations through a combination of structured learning, access to experts and mentors, connections to networks and funders, and opportunities for peer-to-peer collaborations. These elements are typically delivered through a mix of in-person and online sessions, one-on-one mentoring, group workshops, and hands-on learning formats. Applying a gender lens to program design and delivery means recognising that women and men often enter such programs with different prior experiences, confidence levels, constraints, and expectations, and that identical content and formats do not always lead to equivalent outcomes.

Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model, gender-sensitive programming intentionally adapts what content is delivered, how it is delivered, who delivers it, and in which format, to ensure that all participants can engage and benefit equally. In practice, this can involve: adjusting teaching methods (e.g., more structured explanations and practice in finance topics); offering delivery formats that account for differing time, mobility, and caregiving constraints; or providing targeted support to address gender-specific barriers such as limited access to finance, networks, or leadership opportunities. Gender-sensitive program design also ensures that facilitators and mentors are gender-diverse and equipped with the skills and awareness to recognise and respond to different participation patterns, learning styles, and constraints. Taken together, these measures ensure that programs are intentionally designed to create inclusive learning conditions, so that women and men have equal opportunities to participate, learn, and succeed.

Why is it hard to ensure gender-sensitive program design and delivery?

Despite over USD1bn spent globally on training programs, evaluations suggest that traditional entrepreneurial training often fails to deliver transformative outcomes for women-led organizations [1]. This may stem from the fact that women are often not involved in designing these programs, as ESOs are disproportionately led by men [2]. Men-dominated teams tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, reflecting their experiences and perspectives. As a result, many programs unknowingly favor men due to ingrained biases and fail to address the specific barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, such as limited access to capital, restrictive legal frameworks, cultural biases, and internal challenges like a lack of confidence, education, and mentorship. Additionally, these programs may focus on outcomes more aligned with male entrepreneurs' priorities. Studies reveal that women-led teams place greater emphasis on mentorship from business experts (33%) and business skills development (25%), followed by securing direct venture funding (17%). In contrast, male-led teams prioritize network development (38%) and investment-driven benefits, such as access to investors (19%) and securing funding (13%) [3].

Why is gender-sensitive program design and delivery important?

Gender-sensitive program design and delivery are essential for ESOs seeking to maximize their impact. While meta-analyses show that traditional training programs can increase sales by 5% and profits by 10% on average [4], these benefits tend to be smaller for women entrepreneurs, especially in environments where social norms restrict their opportunities. By addressing the distinct needs of entrepreneurs from diverse gender groups, these programs can unlock significant financial and social returns. Tailoring programs to better support women leads to improved outcomes for women-led ventures and a stronger track record for the ESOs. A World Bank Gender Innovation Lab training program in Togo, which focused on personal initiative and soft skills for women, demonstrated that this focus led to substantial improvements in the business performance of participants [5].

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[1] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/21bce9c8-a715-4326-bd1e-93654e3cc15e/content

[2] 87% of corporate-run accelerators in 2016 were men-led (source: https://www.giz.de/de/downloads/giz2022-0011en-accelerating-women-entrepreneurs-handbook.pdf)

[3] https://incae.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Accelerators-as-drivers.pdf

[4] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/21bce9c8-a715-4326-bd1e-93654e3cc15e/content

[5] https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/01/18/new-mindset-increased-profits-lessons-from-an-innovative-entrepreneurial-training-in-togo

How does one implement gender-sensitive program design and delivery?

To ensure your program is truly gender-sensitive, focus on the following six implementation steps:

1. **Understand your participants' pipeline and cohorts through gender-disaggregated analysis:** The foundation of successful program design lies in a systematic understanding of how women and men participants differ in terms of needs, constraints, and starting points. ESOs should collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data on participants' backgrounds, skills, and experience, and time, mobility, and caregiving constraints, among others. For example, if participants have caregiving responsibilities, evening sessions should be avoided.
2. **Define content and curriculum with a gender perspective:** Gender sensitivity should be embedded in core curriculum design. This can be done at three levels:

- Deliver standard entrepreneurship topics with a gender lens: core entrepreneurship topics such as finance, growth, business models, leadership, and pitching should be retained, but they may need to be delivered differently to women and men to achieve equivalent learning outcomes. Evidence shows that women and men often enter programs with different prior exposure and confidence levels, which affect how they engage with and absorb the same material. For example, finance and investment topics may require a more structured, step-by-step approach, with additional practical exercises, for participants with less formal finance training, who are more often women. Similarly, in leadership and pitching sessions, women will likely understate achievements, speak less in plenary discussions, or anticipate greater skepticism, while men may be more comfortable with self-promotion and competitive formats. Facilitators should therefore intentionally vary delivery methods, such as using structured turn-taking, smaller group exercises, explicit encouragement, and tailored feedback styles.
- Integrate mandatory gender-focused modules into the curriculum: programs should include explicit, mandatory modules on gender-related topics, such as understanding gender bias and how it affects one's team, customers, product design, and supply chain.
- Offer a flexible menu of content to respond to different needs: some topics may, on average, be more relevant or attractive to women participants, such as growth mindset development, confidence-building, and risk-taking. ESOs can respond by offering optional tracks, clinics, or peer-learning circles (including women-only groups where appropriate), allowing participants to tailor their learning while maintaining a common core.

3. **Develop gender-sensitive program materials and positioning:** All program materials and communication should be reviewed through a gender lens. This includes using gender-inclusive language, avoiding visuals or examples that reinforce stereotypes, and ensuring that images reflect diverse women entrepreneurs rather than stereotyped founders' profiles. Program positioning and messaging should also be adapted. Overly competitive "work hard, play hard" narratives, or framing programs as only for elite, high-growth founders, can discourage women from applying. In contrast, emphasizing a supportive learning environment, strong peer communities, practical relevance, and predictable, well-communicated schedules can significantly increase women's participation.

4. **Offer delivery formats with gender-specific needs in mind:** Organizational and logistical considerations should account for gender-specific constraints. While in-person formats can foster engagement, they often impose higher time and travel costs on women with caregiving responsibilities or tighter operational roles. Fully online formats may reduce travel but can be challenging for participants with lower digital confidence or a preference for personal interaction. Practical improvements include avoiding periods that commonly conflict with childcare; strategically mixing in-person and online formats to reduce travel and overnight stays; and providing recordings or make-up options when possible.
5. **Ensure gender balance in the program delivery team:** Gender-balanced training and mentors' teams help create a more inclusive and relatable learning environment. However, mentor pools typically consist of men, as senior women entrepreneurs tend to be more time-constrained and less likely to accept non-work-related commitments. ESOs can take practical steps by broadening mentor profiles to include younger women with specific expertise (such as fundraising, product launch, or sector knowledge), actively sourcing mentors through women founder networks, sector associations, and alumni communities, and designing mentorship formats that fit women mentors' time constraints.
6. **Train own staff and external providers on gender inclusion:** Once the diverse delivery team is in place, ESOs should provide mandatory gender training for staff, facilitators, and mentors. Training should focus on concrete behaviors, such as monitoring who speaks and for how long, actively inviting quieter participants to contribute, recognizing patterns of self-doubt or understatement among participants, and providing specific, encouraging feedback. Facilitators should also be equipped to manage group dynamics by addressing interruptions, drawing attention to subtle exclusion, and responding flexibly, within program limits, to time or mobility constraints.
7. **Track, evaluate, report and adjust:** Put in place a system to track and report on gender diversity and inclusion across your organization, particularly within teams involved in program design, decision-making, and delivery. Anchor this process with clear, measurable targets and metrics related to both representation and progression (e.g. women in leadership and senior roles; gender balance across functions; diversity among trainers, mentors, and service providers; pay equity and access to promotion opportunities). Regularly review this data to identify gaps or bottlenecks (such as strong gender balance at junior levels but limited representation in leadership) and to assess whether internal policies and practices are driving meaningful change. To learn more, see our resource #2: Gender-related program target setting.

Case study

Empowering female entrepreneurs through gender-sensitive acceleration programs by Alterna

Alterna fostered more gender equity in entrepreneurship by adapting its program design and delivery to address gender biases faced by women entrepreneurs while growing their businesses.

Alterna is an entrepreneurial support organization (ESO) dedicated to developing the next generation of social entrepreneurs in Central America and beyond. It provides acceleration programs, tools, and resources to support social enterprises in launching, strengthening, and scaling impact-driven ventures. Since 2013, Alterna has worked with over 2,000 entrepreneurs, 48% of whom are women and 37% from rural areas.

When Alterna examined how gender influences entrepreneurial success, it uncovered systemic biases disadvantaging women. For instance, research shows that the characteristics traditionally associated with successful entrepreneurs - visionary leadership, confidence, and risk-taking- are more often associated with men rather than women. This bias impacts how female entrepreneurs are perceived, evaluated, and funded. One particularly striking study found that during pitch competitions, men were more likely to receive "promotion" questions (focused on growth potential), while women were more frequently asked "prevention" questions (focused on risks and losses) [6]. This discrepancy resulted in female entrepreneurs receiving seven times less funding than those who were asked promotion-focused questions. Recognizing these barriers, Alterna sought to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into its programs – both design and delivery - to level the playing field for women entrepreneurs. To do so, Alterna:

- developed a specialized program aimed at equipping high-potential female entrepreneurs with the skills and strategies to navigate gender-related challenges, which includes:
  - a workshop addressing key barriers to growth for women entrepreneurs, providing tools to strengthen their entrepreneurial competence
  - pitch preparation coaching, emphasizing techniques to manage gender bias in investor questioning, such as reframing prevention-focused questions with promotion-oriented responses to highlight market opportunities and growth potential
- recognized the need to engage investors as well, designing programs to help them identify and mitigate unconscious biases in investment decision-making
- introduced internal gender mainstreaming initiatives, including periodic gender training for the team and ongoing reviews to ensure the practice of gender inclusion within the team.

[6] Kanze, D., Huang, L., Conley, M. A., & Higgins, E. T. (2018). We ask men to win and women not to lose: Closing the gender gap in startup funding. Academy of Management Journal, 61(2), 586–614.

Through these initiatives, Alterna has driven measurable impact. The 18 women who participated in the initial workshop mentioned above saw an average sales growth of 208% within a year, and collectively raised more than $286,000 in capital. Moreover, Alterna leveraged its gender-focused approach to unlock new business opportunities, securing a regional partnership with UN Women to support over 600 female entrepreneurs across Central America. Last but not least, this initiative strengthened Alterna's investment pipeline, leading to a portfolio in which 64% of funded entrepreneurs are women, a figure more than three times the industry average.