

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: Female entrepreneurship, HC 711

Wednesday 25 February 2026

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); Alex Brewer; Rosie Duffield; Christine Jardine.

Questions 197 - 211

### Witnesses

**I:** Debbie Wosskow OBE, Co-Chair, Invest in Women Taskforce; Jenny Tooth OBE, Executive Chair, UK Business Angels Association; and Tara Attfield-Tomes, Founder, The 51% Club and EAST VILLAGE.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Business Angels Association [[FEN0037](#)]

Invest in Women Taskforce [[FEN0081](#)]

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Debbie Wosskow, Jenny Tooth and Tara Attfield-Tomes.

**Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today we are holding an oral evidence session on female entrepreneurship, and this will provide an update on the Government's response to our report. It is fair to say it has been a game of two halves, with very positive noise around Innovate UK and our recommendations, but in terms of transparency and the statistics around venture capital, we are still not seeing the dial move in the right direction towards investment in women. If recent statistics are to be believed, it is actually moving the wrong way. We will hear from Debbie Wosskow OBE, co-chair of the Invest in Women Taskforce, Jenny Tooth OBE, executive chair of the UK Business Angels Association, and Tara Attfield-Tomes, founder of the 51% Club and EAST VILLAGE. Thank you all for coming, and welcome.

Q197 **Christine Jardine:** I am from Edinburgh West. First, a key concern outlined to the Committee in its inquiry last year was the lack of venture capital funding going to female founders and the systemic sexism in the sector. Are there any signs of improvement?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Hi, everyone, and thanks for having us. First, I want to say thank you for last year's Committee report, which called for bolder action from both the public sector and the private sector. As part of the momentum, it recognised the role of the Invest in Women Taskforce and endorsed our mission—exactly as you framed the question—of ensuring diversity in the way that investment decisions and allocations are made in the UK.

I was here a year ago when the Invest in Women Taskforce had raised a funding pot of £250 million. We have now raised £635 million in capital, which was hard work, so I am quite tired. There are reasons to be cheerful, as it is a big number that nowhere else in the world has managed to put together, and I am really proud of that. It is institutional capital, which is slow to shift the dial. In my day job, I am a female entrepreneur who has built three businesses to exit, so I live and breathe this stuff with my co-chair, Hannah Bernard, but to look at those numbers, it can feel dispiriting, because it takes a village; frankly, it takes the crazed mission of two difficult women to pull a conversation that did not exist two years ago into £635 million. The role of the Invest in Women Taskforce is to address one of the most persistent market failures in UK growth finance, which is that female entrepreneurs do not get backing, despite the fact that we deliver 35% better returns than male entrepreneurs.

Our approach has been deliberate: we want to back female founders, but we also want to back female funders because a female investor is twice as likely as a male investor to back a female entrepreneur. The soundtrack to my entrepreneurial life is that I am really good at asking



men for money, otherwise I would not have had a career, but we need that to change.

So far, the taskforce has funded £70 million of the £635 million in 15 deals, so some 11% of the amount allocated in year one. The £130 million allocated by institutions to the Women Backing Women fund of funds is a big tranche of money that will make a difference. Forgive me for getting a bit technical here. I will let the others speak.

**Jenny Tooth:** This is your piece.

**Debbie Wosskow:** It is my piece. What is it, and why is it important? It is an institutional pot that backs female investors with a mandate for money to be invested in women-led and mixed teams in the UK. Mixed teams are important. If you look at the 2024 statistics, 87p in the pound of venture capital went to back a business with no female ownership. These rooms are important, but men are really important in the conversation because otherwise we all just talk to one another in violent agreement. We need to make the case for male founders to have female co-founders.

To be honest, I have a single message: we need more money. We are extremely grateful to the early supporters that led the way: Barclays, M&G, BGF, Nationwide and the British Business Bank, which we will talk about. Without them, we would be nowhere—we would be two women swinging in the wind. But the pension fund industry now needs to follow that leadership. I was trying to come up with an appropriate motto for this room. I thought it might be Taylor Swift, but it is Elvis Presley: a little less conversation, a little more action. That will be my call to action for 2026.

**Christine Jardine:** I thought you were going to say, "It's now or never."

**Debbie Wosskow:** We could go at this for a while.

Q198 **Christine Jardine:** Thank you very much. Jenny and Tara, did you want to add anything to that?

**Jenny Tooth:** I will talk about the angel piece in due course, when you come on to that, but in terms of the landscape that we all do battle with, our big issue is women in leadership. We are very focused on women as founders, but the role that women play in leadership and decision making in venture capital is fundamental. In addition to women building and growing their own funds, which is fundamental to the work done with the Invest in Women Taskforce, the numbers of women in leadership, decision-making and partnership roles in venture capital is still exceedingly low.

We are at an early stage. Since we last spoke, little data has come out from big reports—for example, on the Investing in Women Code—but we know that the proportion of women able to take leadership within venture capital funds is a major issue. We still do not have a big enough pipeline



of women who are able to become general partners and have the courage to build their own funds. This is a constant issue within the industry. I see those women as well, because many of them are angel investors. There is a massive link between women in venture capital and women as angels. We need to think more about systemic issues in the way venture capital funding works as this is a big issue.

Secondly, I worry about the imbalance across regions. In the latest data that came out of Beauhurst for 2025, we still see a pattern where 55% of money goes to London and so much less to the regions where, although there have been increases, they are spread out and still relatively fragmented compared with the number of women founders and mixed teams that could be looking for venture capital.

There is a twin issue that we must not forget: who makes decisions within those decision-making firms. We must continue to tackle that issue as well as build many more women-focused and women-led funds. As I said, the regional division is incredibly important. It leads to all kinds of issues because once you have thin markets of venture capital, that affects all the other parts of the supply chain. I will say shortly how incredibly imbalanced things are in the angel world. We still see a thin supply chain across the regions that we should continue to be concerned about.

Q199 **Christine Jardine:** It sounds very much as if there are not many signs of improvement. We suggested a new tax incentive and increased transparency that might help shift the dial on venture capital. The Government rejected that recommendation. Should they reconsider?

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** It is an absolute yes from me. SEIS and EIS—especially in the founder community and in those regional ecosystems—is talked of as one of the greatest things the United Kingdom offers, but not enough people know about it.

**Debbie Wosskow:** Not enough women know about it.

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** Definitely. That is what I was going to say. One piece of the puzzle is to make sure that women in the investment space consider and are aware of these incentives. To then have a space that is female-focused is a massive quick win. It gives an opportunity to provide focus and consistency. To your first question around whether sexism and bias still exist, of course they do. It is a much wider issue than investment or entrepreneurship; it is societal. There is something around transparency. I am not against quotas until we are at a point where we have more women and people from different backgrounds in leadership and decision-making roles. It is what those people provide to the room and bring in terms of experiences.

The Invest in Women Taskforce does phenomenal work, but it is hard and takes time. There are lots of brilliant businesses and women out there that need money now to scale, and our economy needs them as the



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drivers. If the Government were to reconsider, it would be a huge and quick win for the entire ecosystem. But we have to do great work in talking about the incentives. We know from Jenny and the work done with angels that there is an easy way to deploy that information and boost credentials.

**Debbie Wosskow:** All businesses need to get started. The data on this is always so interesting. If you look at the basics of what makes a growth company appropriate for venture capital, one in five of those businesses is founded by a woman. Yet under 2% get capital, and the statistics are worse in 2025. I speak from real-life, in-the-moment experience. I have just closed a funding round for a business that I chair called The Better Menopause, which produces doctor-developed supplements for women in perimenopause and menopause. It has a primarily female cap table and only and exclusively reaches a female audience. It was really hard raising money for that business. It is mine—I am the executive chair—and you would think I have a big enough mouth to do it well. It is difficult because we want to raise money from women, but women do not invest as much. It is very complicated to put that capital piece together. The fact of the matter is that women's networks are not as good as men's.

SEIS is the defining point that helps businesses get started. Women in SEIS de-risk investment for women and female entrepreneurs whose networks are not as good as men's in London, and certainly not out of London. The increase from £150,000 to £250,000 is game-changing. Again, looking at the stats, we know that AI boomed in 2025. To nail that down, £7 billion of equity investment last year was in AI. But look at this: male teams averaged £6.5 million raised; for female teams, it was £0.9 million. AI is a capital-intensive game. If you look at the businesses that women tend to found, they are often—not always—consumer businesses. My game is: Love Home Swap, The Better Menopause and targeting the female consumer. That is what I know how to do. Consumer investment is still largely concentrated in all-male teams, which average £3 million per deal compared with £1.6 million for mixed teams and £0.8 million for female founders. We do more with less, and that is why we are good for the money. But it is still less, and there is a huge structural issue.

I have another policy ask, if I may. I am very focused and have spent the last two years talking about the institutional end of money, because that is how we create systemic change. We have benefited from having our first female Chancellor, who has made sure it is an agenda item where Government have convening power. She has made use of that, and I am very grateful. I would like to ensure that any policy conversations around Mansion House, or what is now known as the Sterling 20, have a gender lens. The Government's big initiative is to make sure that we back ourselves as a country with pension fund capital in the way that Australia, Canada and America do. If we do not talk about the gender component from the beginning, we will lose out.



The initial Mansion House signatories committed £350 billion over five years. Can women have some of that? If we do not talk about it now, we will have none of it, and we will create a growth and private capital economy of the future that does not have women front and centre. In all this, my policy ask is that the Sterling 20 conversations have a gender focus. On 10 March, I go to Scotland as part of the Government's pension fund engagement to make that point to the 20 partners in a closed-door conversation. That is how we move from £635 million to where I would like us to be, which is at £1 billion and beyond. If we do not start policy conversations with a gender aspect, we sure as hell will not get them introduced later on.

**Q200 Christine Jardine:** Somebody mentioned the British Business Bank a few minutes ago. As we have said, the Investor Pathways Capital initiative aims to direct £200 million to females. What impact is that initiative having? How does the programme differ from the funding provided by the Invest in Women Taskforce?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Let us be clear on what the British Business Bank has done, as it is helpful to lay that out. In 2024, it committed an initial £50 million to the Invest in Women Taskforce—this will be a direct-to-fund investment as part of an investment programme that backs early-stage investors—and a further £50 million in July 2025. So that is £100 million in a new pot of capital to run through the ECF, a programme which backs emerging fund managers that tend to be first-time funders. It is about new money. Believe me, there is no way that it is not new money—they are very accountable on that. They then put a further £30 million into the fund of funds. Without using too much jargon, they are one of the LPs—the institutional backers of the fund of funds. So that is £130 million of commitment to the Invest in Women Taskforce. I am really pleased about that. Would I like more? Obviously, and you would expect me to say that.

In line with that, the Investor Pathways Capital programme is a step change. It is good news. It is a £400 million initiative. The difference is that it says that at least 50% of the £400 million targets female fund managers. I see that as the British Business Bank's response to the conversations and dialogue we have had with them for two years around gender-balanced investment committees.

Again, what is the essay question? Is this egregious sexism or is it just men pattern-matching? Let us be generous and say it is the latter. It is an investor's job to know what delivers returns and to look for the same thing. So we must have gender-balanced investment committees. I would like to see the British Business Bank go even further and apply a gender lens to all its funding so that it goes only to diverse investment teams. It is in a brilliant position to role model behaviours.

As ever, this is not a D&I conversation. Diverse investment teams deliver enhanced performance. Would I like more money from BBB? You would expect me to say yes. If we are to get over £1 billion, then yes, absolutely. But the bank is also in a brilliant position to role model how



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investment decisions get made. That is a massive part of driving systemic change. If you have more women in the room, more women get backed.

Q201 **Christine Jardine:** So it is not just the amount of money but how it is decided?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Yes. I always want more money because more money is good, but it is how it gets allocated that matters. A female investor is twice as likely as a male investor to back a female entrepreneur. If you have investment committees where there is no woman in the room, what will happen? The obvious will happen. The British Business Bank is in a brilliant position where it has access to funds. It is the nation's SME bank. It backs the funders. Let us make sure that women make those decisions alongside men about who gets backed.

**Jenny Tooth:** I will add to that and go back to the EIS point. There were two aspects to what you put forward that at the time were ignored or brushed to one side. One was the age limit, which is fundamental. There is a call for evidence on EIS, which gives many of us a chance to re-galvanise on the point—this was not covered in the Budget—that we need to extend, double or even abolish the age limit on EIS. For many women, and people in the regions and underrepresented groups, the journey to set up a business and be ready to ask for investment takes so much longer and has so many other hazards, including everything from childcare to economics and not having family, networks and so on. The whole business takes so much longer. This is a massive opportunity to address many of those issues around when to get started, when to ask for equity, and allow that process to be not self-limiting but rather enable women to have access when they are ready to go. That is a very fundamental matter.

The FEIS needs to be worked out. Coming from the investment side, I know what an incentive EIS is to angel and private investors. I know how much it makes them do. It is not just about the tax; it makes them put more money into entrepreneurs and take more risks. That should be our objective in putting forward the FEIS. Therefore, we need to think carefully about what the tax break will look like and how we make sure it definitely targets women. Also, because of the lack of knowledge among women as entrepreneurs and investors about the opportunities for EIS and SEIS, we need to make sure it is well understood and well used.

The third part of the story is to raise awareness of EIS and SEIS opportunities. Again, we would like to see a massive campaign with HMT and HMRC working alongside many of us who want to put the word out. We need to think how to make the FEIS work. We need knowledge, awareness and take-up, and we need to make sure we have the break right. I am totally supportive of the concept, and we will put that forward again in our response.

When it comes to the British Business Bank, I share the story of many women who have knocked on the door of ECF in the past, and I know





how long and challenging that journey has been. Investor Pathways Capital, which allows easier access for women, is very important.

**Debbie Wosskow:** It is quicker, Jenny.

**Jenny Tooth:** It is so much quicker, and there are so many fewer hoops. The amount of money given is smaller, which has its challenges, but it means women can get on that journey and start to build and grow funds and gain experience. The usual story was, "You don't have the track record, you don't have the experience, so you can't have the money. Go away and spend three years proving that to us." So this is very important.

It is too early to tell. It has not been implemented. Hopefully, it will start in April. I will talk about other measures in relation to angel money shortly, but as a measure—I totally agree with Debbie—it has a strong place to signal to women that they can build and grow their own funds. We see many women energised by the opportunity to start doing that as part of their pathway.

I will make a point that I made to the BBB about angels. Not all women—amazing as they are as angels and in building amazing angel groups and so on—want to become venture capitalists in order to scale their investing journey and potential. This is not to undermine at all Investor Pathways Capital, but in conversation with the BBB I ask, "How do we make a pathway for women as angels to build and grow their funds?" I will talk a little more about that shortly, but the initiative is getting going. It has huge potential, and I hope it fulfils its purpose, which is to provide an important starting point for so many women who have not been able to get on the ladder.

**Christine Jardine:** Tara, did you want to add anything?

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** No, my colleagues have covered everything.

Q202 **Christine Jardine:** You have already partly answered this: the Government said they do not rule out intervention in future if the level of venture capital investment in female entrepreneurs shows no sign of improvement. What should those interventions look like? Are we at a point where we need them now?

**Debbie Wosskow:** The Women Backing Women fund of funds is £130 million; for it to be at full second-close capacity, it needs to be £250 million. We need that money to come from institutions. I am happy for there to be no intervention if it is not volunteered, but without it, more of a push will be needed. I go back to my policy point on the Sterling 20. I firmly believe in the convening power of Government, who have done a very good job on IWT in inviting people in to have the conversation, but a phase 2 of those conversations might be a little more encouraging. That would be my point.





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If we are to get over £1 billion and beyond, we should note that in 2025 the amount of venture capital invested per se was down 60%. We are a critical part of the bigger conversation around UK plc, the growth agenda and ROI. Less investment was made in 2025, and we are back down to 2019 levels. Obviously, women are disproportionately affected because even though investment was down overall, in AI it was up, where it was down in women. We need to make sure that, if there is an intervention, it is one for the sake of the UK's growth.

We know the oft-quoted Rose Review statistics—they have been around for almost a decade now—that if women scale businesses at the same rate as men, it will add an extra £250 billion a year to UK plc. My sense is that number will have gone up, but we need it. I focus on the big-ticket number. How do we do the hard thing? In this forum, I want to emphasise that this is private capital—that may have become slightly confused a year ago. This is not taxpayers' money. This is not money that we have been given; this is an industry-led but Government-backed initiative led by two women on a mission. That cannot be the solution for everything. We have to create pillars where the institution and the shift supports themselves. In order for that to happen, it may take more encouragement frankly, more convening, and a more pointed conversation.

If institutions such as Barclays, M&G, the BBB and Nationwide write big cheques, that cannot come from two women on a mission. We need to make it part of how all pension funds think about backing the growth agenda in the UK. In these rooms, we need to land the point that this is a performance and an unashamedly capitalist conversation. This is about creating wealth. I firmly believe that women need to get rich in order to deploy their capital in backing other women, and this is part of that conversation. Might that take a little more stick than carrot? I hope not. I will report back to you after I have been to Scotland on 10 March, but I suspect it might.

**Chair:** That is the end of our first section. We still have six more to do, and another 15 questions at least. So if there is any more data and you want to go into greater detail, please feel free to send it to us afterwards.

Q203 **Alex Brewer:** Thank you all for coming back in. I thoroughly enjoyed our previous conversations and want to pepper you with more questions. I am going to focus on the Invest in Women Taskforce. Debbie, thank you for giving us that update, which is very interesting. I would like to talk a little about the £635 million that has been committed to the taskforce but deployed by institutional investors themselves. I am trying to understand the oversight of that. How will we know when it is allocated? How does that work?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Forgive me for the complexity here. This might not necessarily be what you want, but the devil is in the detail. You have to break down the £635 million. Some £130 million of the £635 million is going into what is known as a fund of funds. As the taskforce, we ran a



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tender process to find an independent, female-run fund of funds manager to manage the money totally at arm's length from the taskforce. Some 26 different fund of funds managers applied; we did a beauty parade down to three. The women-backed business running it is called Bootstrap 4F. Its job is to manage the money, as any fund of funds manager would, and to decide—to your point, Alex—which institutions, GPs or venture capital funds it backs. The money that comes from the Women Backing Women fund of funds, which is currently £130 million—this is always such a memory test—is invested in by Barclays, the British Business Bank, M&G, Nationwide and the Visa Foundation, and we are hoping for more. Bootstrap 4F's job is to independently decide which.

I really want to land that because it is not the Invest in Women Taskforce's decision; it is not the Chancellor's decision; it is not anybody's. Critically, it is being run as an independent fund of funds, and its job is to return capital to its investors. It decides. It has an investment committee, an LPAC, and all the usual ways that a fund of funds is run. If you have that £130 million in your mind, the rest of the maths is made up as follows—again, this is a memory test. £100 million of the £635 million is the British Business Bank putting money into the ECF. That is new capital to back emerging female fund managers. Some £275 million of the money is BGF, the Business Growth Fund, which I think you have had here before. Again, it is about the complexity. It is backing female-run businesses. It is new capital to sit alongside its initial £25 million commitment—a total of £300 million—to be deployed to back female-owned businesses. It would do that directly through the BGF. It has started to do that already over the last six months or so. Morgan Stanley has committed £25 million. It is doing smaller cheques and, again, all this—I will make sure you have it by way of follow-up—is on the Invest in Women Taskforce website. It is really important that people know where to go. Part of what Morgan Stanley does is £250,000 cheques directly to back female entrepreneurs through an incubator programme. It backs earlier-stage businesses, and that has an adjacency to what Morgan Stanley does in financial services. Aviva has committed £50 million to invest directly into female-owned businesses.

Why is it like that? It is so frigging hard, Alex, to get these people over the line, I cannot even tell you. In a way, our job at the IWT is to hold them accountable that it is new money, it is being deployed and—to Sarah's starting point—that, when they report their data, it shows where they are backing women and that this capital is being deployed in line with the terms of the Invest in Women Taskforce.

The fund of funds has a separate life, and in a dream world I would have all the money going to the fund of funds because that is how you genuinely drive systemic change. You have women making totally independent investment decisions about backing female VCs, and the female VCs then make the decisions about which entrepreneurs to back. That is my dream. Frankly, it is not easy to persuade every institution to join hands with one another, but I am really pleased that the British



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Business Bank is part of that because it showcases that big institutions can do it. We frame it as fund of funds contributions and what we call partners. They report into the Invest in Women Taskforce once a quarter on how they have deployed capital, to what and how it performs. That is how we get to the £635 million.

I would love for that fund of funds to be huge, because that is how we do it—we back more female VCs. I also know, Alex, that when we announced that Bootstrap 4F was the fund of funds manager of choice, at the London Stock Exchange with Julia, there was some concern, probably from men, that there just would not be enough female VCs to back. If I rewind two years, I heard that a lot, “This is great, Debbie, but there aren’t any. Where’s the money going?” We had 89 different female funds turn up to the London Stock Exchange. They are there, but a lot of them have not raised money yet, have raised small amounts of money or are doing it as aided funding. If we can back them, that is going to take more than £130 million. It is complicated for a reason. The fund of funds is definitely my priority for the rest of the year, but we will take partner commitments. When we look at the Sterling 20, which ties into an earlier point, quite a lot of them are regional pension funds. They need to be making contributions, because that is also how we get money outside of London.

Q204 **Alex Brewer:** Does the BGF, which is obviously quite substantial, contribute its quarterly reporting the same as all the others?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Yes, exactly.

Q205 **Alex Brewer:** Are all these funds being distributed and spent as quickly as you would like and in ways you would like? What oversight do you have of how that goes?

**Debbie Wosskow:** I am probably one of the UK’s most legendarily impatient people. I am professionally impatient. Is it quick enough for me? No.

**Alex Brewer:** You are in good company in this room.

**Debbie Wosskow:** The balance needs to be deployed wisely and prudently so that it delivers returns. I really want to make that point, Alex, because you and I have discussed this before. I hear “Is it quick enough?” a lot. I hear it from the press; I hear it from everyone. On one level, no. On the other hand, anybody who has been involved with setting up a fund knows that setting up a fund of funds in under a year is world record-breaking stuff. It is regulated capital from financial institutions with investors. The whole process is a separate reg; it is a serious thing. When we had our annual event on 9 December, we said that the fund of funds would be up and running at the beginning of this year, and it will be; it is just going through final investment committees from the LPs. I think I will sleep at night when it is up and running, because that is the thing: all the female VCs want the money; they are ready for the money.



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I hear them. I would like it to be ready and bigger. Is the BGF deploying capital quickly enough? I would say yes. It has done three deals. Looking at my notes here, there are 30 or so deals in the hopper, and I am happy with that. Has the BBB backed enough funds through the ECF quickly enough? The ECF is not a quick process, but it is doing it. Has Aviva run four different incubators since we started? Yes. We are quite ferocious taskmasters on this stuff. We have our quarterly board next week. They turn up, and that is important because they recognise the need for action.

**Chair:** That is a really good place to bring in Rosie on angel investment.

Q206 **Rosie Duffield:** We covered a little about interventions in Christine's last question, and Debbie was saying she does not necessarily think there are any. Tara and Jenny, do you think there should be interventions to accelerate growth in the number of female angel investors? What would that look like? How would it help reach the 30% target by 2030?

**Jenny Tooth:** I will begin with a little data. We are very fortunate in that we have just had a new report launch with data from Beauhurst, which we did in partnership with the Invest in Women Taskforce and UKBAA. Since we last looked at the status of women angel investing in 2022, we have grown the market by 60%. There are now 8,000 women angels in the market. In 2022 there were 5,000, which was 14% of the total angel community. We have increased that through incredible initiatives by amazing women leaders, many of them in the regions. A lot has been happening, but the proportion of women taking decisions about backing more women is still only 14%, which is the reason we need interventions. We are delighted that there are many more angels in the marketplace, and that has happened in the last three and a half years, but the level of so few women is persistent. Perhaps the really worrying statistic is that we know they are investing more than 30% of their total investment in women founders and, in fact, in some years it has been even greater.

What we have seen, though—we have already talked about the equity situation across the UK—is a decrease among women angel investors since 2022. We have seen a 37% decrease in the number of women who invest in women, while seeing an increase of those women in the market. That means 37% less money going to women founders, and we know that the level of demand will have massively increased due to the kind of work that people such as Tara are doing.

We have this ongoing situation where we know that women back women. We know that we can have so much more investing going towards women if we have more of those women in the marketplace. We can grow it, but we cannot grow it sufficiently to have the kind of impact it should have without some further interventions. As you know, last time we talked about the role of the regional angels programme that the British Business Bank has been supporting. It was very good to see that more money was allocated in the spending review, with some £700 million allocated to the regional angels programme. I know your



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recommendation was one I put forward. We needed ringfenced money made available to women angel groups, and that has not happened. When I spoke to you last time, I think the first two small investments had been made to two women's groups. We have not seen any more women's groups being supported. What has been offered is a very minute amount—some £1 million each of the £700 million available to be deployed. We are really talking about not giving money to individual women but to groups of women who are mobilised by women taking leadership, and so that money is massively multiplied.

We have the stats from the Investing in Women Code and from work we have done on a pilot with the BBB, which show that over 10 times that money is leveraged in co-investment when women invest. In other words, the pipeline that they bring and the quality of the businesses that they bring forward, nourish and nurture are then co-invested very successfully, so more of this money. You do the maths and you can see how this would scale.

We need a dedicated women angel co-investment fund—that is the missing gap. We have the investor pathways, which are amazing, and hopefully one day we will get our big Women Backing Women fund off the ground for women in venture capital, because women play such an important role in this space. I mentioned the tax breaks, but we also have another massive gap: a complete lack of participation by the majority of very high net worth women in this country. In other words, the amount of money that women are raising is so much less than they could be were we to have many more of those women participating.

We have a kind of double whammy here. We have the incentive and leverage that co-investment could achieve, but we have a gap in participation due to awareness and education. Actually, there is a lack of a pathway for those women into angel investing because the people who advise them do not let them out to play, do not let them out to use their money. They are given 5% of their money as discretionary money, and a lot of that goes towards philanthropy and other very good things. To allow women to be perceived as having important capital and agency over their money, and to be able to participate in angel investing, is very important indeed. There is hiding behind a regulatory framework, which the advisory and wealth advisory community and wealth allocators use, which seems to be very hard to crack. There is then this whole issue of their awareness and understanding of the importance of women's wealth. We have bigger conversations to have, and we need more awareness, but examples led by the British Business Bank in recognising the power of women in angel investment are still needed.

I will add one thing: the British Business Bank has put a very important initiative on the table, which unfortunately is not connected to the leverage of co-investment. It experimented with supporting four women-led groups for a couple of years, and after the spending review it allocated £4 million towards the Diverse Angel Syndicate. The syndicate



aims to support and grow another cohort of 15 angel groups, 50% of which will be women-led groups while others will be more diverse and quite rightly include underrepresented communities. There is of course intersectionality in that which will also play out. It is a programme of support, education and structural support which will give them a boost. The cliff edge for them is that, however well they grow them, there is nothing after it that will continue to leverage the power and the opportunity that we will have achieved. That has already been shown with the existing cohort of women that has been supported.

There is a lot to be done, and these women are mainly taking leadership and doing fantastic work in the regions, but you can see the disconnect across the market and how we would love to have this connect up so much more successfully with what could be achieved here. I am putting this back on the table because I feel that we are not making the kind of progress we could be, and the target we have established for ourselves of 30% by 2030 feels like the Greek myth of the boulder being pushed up the hill that rolls back down again.

**Q207 Rosie Duffield:** Yes, I know that one. Thank you very much. That is really interesting. Tara, how would you specifically like more invested in those underrepresented regions? I know that is your area.

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** I have to reinforce how important this point is. Debbie and I were talking outside. She is laser-focused on the institutional money and the work that Jenny is doing with angel investors. This is the key. Only 2% to 4% of women-led businesses get to £1 million-plus revenue. When you get to £1 million-plus revenue, doors unlock. Investment sometimes gets a little easier. This is a generalisation, but if we have only 4% of women getting into the angel investment market at that early stage, it is such an important piece of the puzzle. Do not get me wrong; I spend a lot of time on my mission to get more women rich, and Debbie shares this with me. That is it; it is simple. I do not want equity investment to be a red herring, because there is a much bigger piece of the puzzle here. Lots of women are building brilliant businesses; they are bootstrapping and finding other capital. This piece is really important for a set of women.

It is hugely important when it comes to the regions. The West Midlands Co-Investment Fund, run by Future Planet Capital, is a really brilliant example of how the west midlands is driving this piece. It has £25 million to deploy; it is not masses of money. Actually, only 18% of the inquiries it has had for investment have been from women-led businesses and mixed teams. There is a huge education piece there, because there is money sitting on the table. That then reflects down into things like angel investment, and we need to do more. I agree with interventions because we have to encourage more women into the angel investment space. That regional support needs to look targeted and intentional. We need to be encouraging exited founders back in. We absolutely need to be leveraging the financial institutions where they get their advice because





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they are not allowed out to play and that is a massive problem. For me, a way to do that is through interventions and using transparency as a way to applaud the people who are doing it well and give more access to tax incentives.

We have to unlock the regions because you do not know what you do not know, and you do not know who you do not know. I work with founders every single day. We have local hubs up and down the country. I have never heard more of a call for support to be in the regions. I have never had more people come to our door, banging down our door and saying, "Please set up the 51% Club here. There is no ecosystem, or the ecosystem is not for me. It doesn't speak to me. I don't understand the business support." The problem is that there are lots of brilliant things being done. The work being done by the taskforce and UKBAA, all those things are great, but are they filtering down to the female founder in Birmingham, Worcester, Leeds or south Derbyshire? Absolutely not. That is where interventions could be key. This is where it is about the Government genuinely backing this as a strategy, and not rejecting everything by just saying, "Oh, it's everyone's responsibility," because then it becomes nobody's priority.

We have to have that top-down credibility and co-ordination that then helps it filter out everywhere. I see a lot of money in the regions still going to the same men running the same business programmes. Where is the quality? Where is the consistency? The Government could provide that by putting some of this back on the table and genuinely having a female entrepreneurship strategy that is not just about investment, it is the whole piece, and that could be one of the most powerful things for this economy. I really believe that, but we have to have that credibility because that credibility has to drive quality.

Back to some of Debbie's points: this is not charity, but this is what the conversation quickly becomes. This is about actual growth and backing all women. I do not care if a woman only wants to make £50,000 a year selling candles from her kitchen because that covers her bills and it gives her a comfortable life. I do not mind that. If we can ensure she makes that money and a few of those women turn into the Maxine Lacebys of Absolute Collagen and some of the brilliant super scalers we are seeing, that should not be an extraordinary story; it is quick interventions that will do it. Some of this institutional work is going to take time. We have much quicker wins that we can be doing around the quality of that business support and how the Government actually feeds that down, and I am sure we will come on to that regional piece. There is great work being done, but I do not think it is feeding down to the founders at all. We really have to understand and get that co-ordination right. The puzzle needs to slowly come together, but with things happening, because they are not—there is no acceleration. I am a PR person by trade; that is what I do. We can PR all these brilliant things but the reality is it is not moving the dial for anybody and that is the bit that we have to move.





Q208 **Chair:** We have touched quite a lot on the British Business Bank, so I am going to move straight to transparency. Tara, could the bank be more transparent in its funding and support, or in how that funding is used by those in receipt of its support? If so, in what areas would more data be useful?

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** Of course I am all for transparency. Actually, we have to get better at mapping what the journey of an entrepreneur looks like. This is never linear. As anyone will know, it is not a linear thing, so we cannot just create a road map that says you start here and end there. What we are not doing very well is explaining what the British Business Bank does for the founders, because people think "Oh, it's the UK's SME bank, so I'm knocking on the door because I'm setting up a business," or "I'm running a business. They're going to give me money, right?" What we are not doing very well is piecing together what access to capital looks like at every level and through every channel. That needs to be done better because that is then going to give us a better way to use data to understand if the problem is actually at the British Business Bank's level. I do not think it is.

A huge problem is the high street and challenger banks. I do a lot of work with brilliant banks in the way they are supporting the Invest in Women Taskforce and the things they are doing on the ground. HSBC has its Women's Business Growth Initiative. It is putting money into great women. It is making money available, but it is only at a certain stage. Everyone opens a business bank account, and then what? We are still at the point where it is so easy to open a challenger bank account on your phone in minutes, but what is that advice? What is that support? How are you being directed to the right kind of capital? The relationship managers of yesteryear in high street banks exist, but they do not want to know you unless you are at £5 million or £10 million, and we have already established that women are not getting to that point.

We have to use the data better, but we do not have enough data to understand where this is falling down. It is easy to say there are problems at every single level, of course it is, but why are we not getting more women to £1 million revenue? Is that a huge challenge? Where can we better use the data to understand why that bit is falling down? There is probably a lot of education that needs to happen. We definitely have to be using data in a better way. I chair the Whole Point—previously the Lifted Project—in Birmingham. As an initiative, it is working really closely with the taskforce. It examines taxonomy and how we define high-growth women. There is a really great way to use some of that data, but access and understanding what is needed is still a problem. This is why I am all about transparency, because if we better understand how women are being supported, we can then look at what interventions need to come in and what other data we need. At this point we just need the simple data to understand where it is falling down. There is a big piece of work there.



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**Debbie Wosskow:** Sarah, can I pick up on something? I will be quick. Two things: the high street banks actually have not been supportive. Barclays has been supportive, but nobody else has. I really want to make sure we have landed that. Barclays has made a £50 million commitment, but NatWest, HSBC, and Lloyds have not made a commitment.

Q209 **Chair:** What is the reason they did not give a commitment? Did they just say no outright?

**Debbie Wosskow:** This is part of point two—it is exactly the right question. If we focus on zero to £1 million in revenue—on how you get started, open a bank account and make that the conversation—my worry is that we let people off the hook.

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** Yes, we do. Absolutely.

**Debbie Wosskow:** This is what slightly worries me. All this stuff is amazing: Buy Women Built, Sahara and so on are super scalers, which is fantastic. There are all these initiatives. One of the points they make is that women scale businesses differently. I think that is what you are saying, Tara.

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** Yes.

**Debbie Wosskow:** In a way, because women have not had the same access to capital, they can do it differently, but why the hell should they have to? I suppose that is my point: why did those banks not commit? HSBC would say, "Well, we do our own programme," and NatWest under Alison Rose's leadership would say, "We opened up a series of £2,000 overdrafts for female-led businesses." I would say, "Sod that. That's just not good enough." It is all very well to convene, have the conversation and give people starter bank accounts, but where is the actual money? You can afford it. It cannot just be Barclays and Nationwide leadership in terms of the high street or building societies; it so happens that Hannah is my partner in crime. I want to land that, and that of course women do it differently. Of course, there are some fantastic businesses out there of £50 million-plus in revenue that have never raised venture capital, mostly because they could not due to the fact that men did not back them; it should not be like that. We need to have the hard conversations. I started my first business in 1999, which shows how old I am now at 52, and this 2% stat has remained utterly consistent for my entrepreneurial lifetime. It will stay there unless we attack it.

Q210 **Christine Jardine:** Tara, there was criticism last year of Innovate UK, which then brought forward a number of commitments to improve support for female founders. Are you happy with those changes? Is there anything else you would like to see Innovate UK do?

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** I was a huge part of that criticism of Innovate UK. I came from quite a unique place, as most people who criticised had applied for the award, or had applied previously for Innovate grants. They came from a place where they had experienced the lengthy and



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ridiculous application process and the bias of assessors who clearly did not understand their businesses. A real movement happened. Of course, we then saw the 10 commitments.

I absolutely have to go on record, because Innovate UK, from the very first conversation I had with it and the very first call we sat on, has been phenomenal, and I do not think enough people give it that credit. It was so willing to listen and understand. It knew some of the problems, but what it did not have—and this is a bigger point—was the comms person, probably female, in the room who said, “Yes, we’ve got to make cuts, but what are the optics of doing this to the Women in Innovation awards which, on the whole, already get less money?” That was a big part of the problem. The communication and decision making were terrible, but it then really opened up. Innovate launched the 10 commitments, one of which was the Women in Innovation community forum, which I sit on. In as controlled a way as it could, its commitments absolutely addressed the challenges that had been raised. More to the point, it absolutely made sure it went out to the regions. It went out to a really broad spectrum of founders and communities, and it made sure it listened and put it in black and white—you do not get that enough. Credit is due there, but is it enough? No.

The biggest issue we have is that we are still in a place where the Women in Innovation awards gets significantly less money. I know it is trying, and we hear a lot of this kind of inclusive-by-design idea and going back to this being everyone’s responsibility. There is no doubt that innovation money through Innovate UK should absolutely have a gender lens. Should there be an award specifically for women in innovation? Yes, I am okay with that, but we need to have those commitments across the entire Innovate UK spectrum, because otherwise we are still in a place where it is one pot of money that is already significantly less.

The commitments are great, but the challenge is that we have come back to this signposting piece and honesty. We still hear about it being an innovator for early-stage businesses. It is not. That is not what it wants to go for. It actually wants to go for slightly later-stage businesses. It wants to fund them multiple times and then to push them into their investor pathways, because it wants a return, which makes absolute sense. I think it has done a terrible job up until this award of saying that because it was trying to be all things to all women. I also said to it, “What does innovation mean?” To some extent, anyone running a business will think they are innovative. If you mean industrial strategy, you need to say that. If you mean just STEM, you need to say that. I am happy that it has done that in the Women in Innovation awards.

Of course, we then have an entitlement from people. There is a misunderstanding behind Innovate’s money and who it is for. Especially when you use the term “grants”, people think of local authority money. They think they are entitled to that money. While I am a founder, I work with founders and try to be the voice in the room that is a reality check,



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"No one's entitled to that money. There are set criteria, and you either absolutely go for that or you do not." I think it has done a better job. Is it enough? No. I still think its assessment process needs a lot of work. It has implemented things. My thing was, "Well, why don't you just have a screening process before anyone applies?" The report that we presented to it showed that, on average, women were spending 80 hours on an application. For 50 awards, which we knew for a little while went down to 25, it had 1,452 applications. That is huge. It is 1,000 women who have spent 80 hours during half-term, normally.

It is trying to make small changes, but a bigger problem always comes down to the speed of its decisions. There are changes within Innovate and things are hopefully going to come out in the next few weeks. We really need to understand what money is going to be available on the whole and how we can then positively impact it, because again it is exactly the same situation we talk about at investment level in investment boards. The bias is there—you get men who do not understand female innovation. A lot of Innovate UK is femtech. Of course men are not going to understand, so that is also a problem. There is a lot of work that has to be done. The criteria have helped. I still think that education is probably not there within the founder community yet, but that is a different issue. I know they are starting to work on the assessment process, the assessors and who those assessors are, but it is not enough. Actually, it is still the same old people putting themselves forward to be assessors.

**Q211 Chair:** Thank you very much. We have covered so much ground. I just want to ask you all a final question. At some stage we are hoping that Innovate UK, the bank and possibly a Minister might come before us again. In one sentence, what would be your ask? What would be your priority?

**Debbie Wosskow:** Pension fund commitments from the Sterling 20, particularly if you get Jason Stockwood.

**Jenny Tooth:** Earmarking dedicated co-investment funds to boost women angel investment.

**Tara Attfield-Tomes:** My priority is a simple female entrepreneurship strategy because we have to look at the whole puzzle, not just investment, business support or tax incentives. It has to be the entire suite, and it has to be Government-down. There needs to be consistency and quality, especially as you start to filter it out beyond the M25.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. That is fantastic. We will have plenty to ask them when they get back to us. Thank you for coming back to the Committee. That brings this session to a close.