

Written evidence submitted by Dr Angela Martinez Dy, Dr Carol Ekinsmyth, Dr Maria Villares-Varela, Dr Lorna Treanor, Professor Susan Marlow, and Dr Sally Jones [FEN0041]

Introduction

We are a group of UK academics specialising in research on women's entrepreneurship and women's business support providers. We have extensive combined experience in the study and support of women's enterprises in the UK over the past 30 years.

Key contributors include:

- Dr Angela Martinez Dy, Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship, Loughborough University London
- Dr Carol Ekinsmyth, Principal Lecturer, University of Portsmouth and Academic Chair of the Women's Enterprise Policy Group
- Dr Maria Villares-Varela, Associate Professor in Sociology, University of Southampton
- Dr Lorna Treanor, Associate Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation, University of Nottingham
- Professor Susan Marlow, Professor of Entrepreneurship, University of Nottingham
- Dr Sally Jones, Reader in Entrepreneurship and Gender Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University

Together, we belong to two relevant organisations: **Gender and Enterprise Network (GEN)** and **Women's Enterprise Policy Group UK (WEPG)**. GEN is a Special Interest Group of the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship. WEPG is a coalition of leading women entrepreneurs, researchers, business support providers, and social entrepreneurs from across the UK.

Summary

- **Systemic Transformation, Not Quick Fixes.** Women's entrepreneurship cannot be advanced through piecemeal approaches. Success requires a holistic strategy that dismantles persistent structural barriers, addresses intersectional challenges and provides comprehensive, long-term support.
- **Creating Ecosystems of Support.** Effective support includes but goes beyond financial resources. Additional critical interventions are targeted skills development for both investors and founders, childcare and benefits support, network building and improving the educational and employment pipeline for women in STEMM.
- **Proactive, Not Reactive.** Traditional support models fail women entrepreneurs by betting only on already successful businesses, applying male-centric frameworks, and ignoring specific challenges faced by women.
- **Data as a Catalyst for Change.** Transformation requires transparency, including mandatory gender-disaggregated data collection, tracking support and funding access, and creating accountability mechanisms.

A range of detailed recommendations regarding *targeted funding mechanisms, holistic support infrastructure, childcare and social support, network and capacity building, institutional accountability, educational and cultural transformation* are listed on pp. 6-7.

1. What are the barriers facing women, including specific groups of women such as those from an ethnic minority background, seeking to start and grow successful businesses in the UK?

A range of complex barriers face women, especially marginalised women, who are undertaking entrepreneurial activities. Addressing these barriers requires an intersectional approach that is sensitive to the ways in which more disadvantaged backgrounds compound these issues.

A. Structural and Institutional Challenges

- Access to effective business support is very much dependent on geographical location; Not only have there been substantial cuts to women's enterprise funding since 2008, but funding opportunities are limited and inconsistent across areas.
- Entrepreneurship discourse and business support systems generally lack a gender-sensitive approach.¹ Local councils provide outdated, male-focused support mechanisms and collect little data that is gender-disaggregated. Growth hubs are not sufficiently interested in women's businesses.
- Women's caring responsibilities mean that they require childcare support for employment and entrepreneurship. In both cases, they report inadequate or overly costly childcare prevents them from having the time they need to progress in their careers.

B. Social and Cultural Challenges

- Systemic bias still exists throughout all aspects of women's entrepreneurial experience. Persistent perceptions of the male 'hero entrepreneur'² undermine women's entrepreneurial potential, and contribute to lower self-efficacy, reduced entrepreneurial legitimacy and lower likelihood of investment. Persistent negative and stereotypical attitudes also persist about women's capabilities in technical and industrial sectors.
- Restrictive socio-cultural norms, stereotypes and practices affect women's participation in entrepreneurial activity. They often have disproportionate caregiving responsibilities and lack of family support. Self-employed mothers experience a range of additional issues, such as a lack of access to statutory parental pay.³
- Racially minoritised women experience compounded barriers of gender and racist bias, and higher susceptibility to systemic discrimination, even with digital businesses.⁴ Migrant and refugee women face additional issues linked to stigmatisation, language barriers and context specific knowledge on regulations and business support provision.⁵

¹ Marlow, S., & Martinez Dy, A. (2018). Is it time to rethink the gender agenda in entrepreneurship research? *International Small Business Journal*, 36(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242617738321>

² Treanor, L., Jones, S., & Marlow, S. (2020). *State of the Art Review Is Time Up for The Hero Male Entrepreneur? A Review of Enterprise Discourse and its Effects*. <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/is-time-up-for-the-hero-male-entrepreneur-a-review-of-enterprise-discourse-and-its-effects-sota-no-34>

³ Ekinsmyth, C. (2023) Family Policy and Women's Entrepreneurship <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/No56-Family-policy-and-womens-entrepreneurship-Ekinsmyth.pdf>. See also a complementary submission to this current call for evidence by our colleague Prof. Julia Rouse, Manchester Metropolitan University, focused specifically on maternity and women's entrepreneurship policy.

⁴ Martinez Dy, A., Marlow, S., & Martin, L. (2017). A Web of opportunity or the same old story? Women digital entrepreneurs and intersectionality theory. *Human Relations*, 70(3), 286–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716650730>

⁵ Refai, D., & Lelontko, E. (n.d.). *Business startup support in West Yorkshire A focus on aspiring migrant women entrepreneurs*. <https://business.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/352/migrant-women-in-business>

Adeeko, N., & Treanor, L. (2022). Negotiating stigmatised identities: Enterprising refugee women in the United Kingdom. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 40(1), 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242621997033>

- Women often take up entrepreneurship to improve work-life balance, but may lose earning power as they leave employment in their pursuit of greater flexibility.
- Given the range of barriers encountered, earnings from self-employment are very low. Self-employed women earn less than any other economically active cohort in the economy; of these, racially minoritised women earn the least.⁶

C. Financial Barriers

- Women tend to have more constrained access than men to entrepreneurial capital and investment, and less knowledge regarding how and where to secure investment.
- Women face systemic biases that manifest in reluctant investment practices, where investors consistently apply different standards to women entrepreneurs.⁷
- This is particularly challenging for women from lower-income backgrounds, with limited financial and social capital.⁸
- Additionally, women who start a business to pursue flexibility in light of caring responsibilities frequently engage in part-time entrepreneurship, lowering their returns.⁹
- Migrant and ethnic minority women confront limited access to resources compounded by gender discrimination and specific racialised discrimination. Whilst they can take advantage of catering for specific communities, they tend to become trapped in saturated spaces of the market with limited opportunities for consolidation and growth.¹⁰
- Current funding and support approaches often perpetuate systemic inequalities by focusing solely on businesses with proven high turnover and existing staff.
- There are a range of challenges for women seeking to combine self-employment with benefit systems.¹¹

D. Skill and Resource Limitations

- In addition to less financial capital, women tend to have lower levels of entrepreneurial resources, including human and social capital¹²

⁶ Martinez Dy, A., Jayawarna, D., & Marlow, S. (2024). Racial Capitalism and Entrepreneurship: An Intersectional Feminist Labour Market Perspective on UK Self-Employment. *Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385241228444>

⁷ Kanze, D., Huang, L., Conley, M. A., & Higgins, E. T. (2018). We ask men to win and women not to lose. *Source: The Academy of Management Journal*, 61(2), 586–614. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26528868>

⁸ Danho, E. J., Dann, Z., Doyle, A., Ekinsmyth, C., Huang, S., Johnston, K., ... & Yarrow, E. L. (2021). Baseline Report 1-Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in France and the UK: The perspectives of disadvantaged female entrepreneurs and stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Available at: <https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/en/publications/baseline-report-1-entrepreneurial-ecosystems-in-france-and-the-uk>

⁹ Villares-Varela, M. and Low, C. "Precarious migrant entrepreneurship: gendered in-work poverty for new migrants in the UK", ISBE Research and Knowledge Exchange (RAKE) Fund 2023 Final report: Available at: <https://www.isbe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/RAKE2023-24-Final-Report-Maria-Villares-Vareia-Southampton.pdf>

¹⁰ Al-Dajani, H. Villares-Varela, M. and Vershinina, N. (2020) What do we know about ethnic and migrant women entrepreneurs?: a review of evidence Enterprise Research Centre, SOTA Review n36. Available at: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/what-do-we-know-about-ethnic-and-migrant-women-entrepreneurs-a-review-of-evidence-sota-review-no-36/>

¹¹ Jones, S., & Nadin, S. (2024). "I'd like to make a proper go of it but it's really scary": the perpetual liminality of informally self-employed women as stigmatized entrepreneurs. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2024.2425945>

¹² Rouse, J. (n.d.). *State of the Art Review How Does Gender Shape Entrepreneurial Resources and Practice? A Review of Evidence*. <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/how-does-gender-shape-entrepreneurial-resources-and-practice-sota-review-no-35/>

- Due to pipeline issues, bias in tech, and fewer women working in technology roles, they also tend to have lesser stocks of digital technology and e-commerce knowledge. Educational streaming discourages women from pursuing technical and entrepreneurial paths.
- Restricted access to effective professional networks and lack of gender-aware business advice. Limited access to mentorship and role models in challenging sectors.
- Constrained business operation spaces (predominantly home-based)

2. In which sectors of the economy do women face the greatest barriers to entrepreneurship, why is this, and what could be done to tackle them?

Women entrepreneurs face significant challenges across multiple economic sectors, with particularly pronounced barriers in traditionally male-dominated industries.

A. STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Mathematics) and start-up Sectors

- The lack of women entrepreneurs in STEMM and start-up sectors reflects complex barriers that begin long before business formation. The roots of these challenges begin in educational pathways, where social pressures and stereotypical attitudes systematically channel young women away from STEMM disciplines.
- Within STEMM careers, masculinist practices constrain career progression, accumulation of entrepreneurial capital, access to professional partnerships and practice ownership and likelihood of new venture creation.¹³ Simultaneously, a narrative of meritocratic advancement obfuscates the gendered structural barriers women face, effectively rendering women responsible for their lack of advancement.¹⁴
- The tech startup ecosystem is a particularly hostile environment, where women encounter multilayered obstacles such as gendered, raced and classed inequality regimes.¹⁵ Education and employment inequity in engineering¹⁶ and technology sectors creates a fundamental pipeline problem, preventing women from gaining the critical experience, seniority, and legitimacy needed to transition into entrepreneurship.

B. Manufacturing and Industrial Sectors

- Manufacturing is a key sector where women's entrepreneurial aspirations are consistently undermined. The industry's traditional masculine culture creates an intimidating landscape where women must constantly negotiate subtle and overt forms of professional resistance.
- Structural barriers in manufacturing extend beyond immediate business challenges, encompassing deep-seated perceptions about women's capabilities and roles in industrial production and innovation.

C. Green and Emerging Technologies

¹³ Treanor, L & Marlow, S. (2019). Paws for thought? Analysing how prevailing masculinities constrain career progression for UK women veterinary surgeons, *Human Relations*, 74(1), 105-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719846554>

¹⁴ Treanor, L., Marlow, S. and Swail, J. (2021), Rationalizing the postfeminist paradox: The case of UK women veterinary professionals. *Gender Work Organ*, 28: 337-360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12568>

¹⁵ Alfrey, L., & Twine, F. W. (2017). Gender-Fluid Geek Girls: Negotiating Inequality Regimes in the Tech Industry. *Gender and Society*, 31(1), 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243216680590>

¹⁶ Powell, A., Bagilhole, B., & Dainty, A. (2009). How women engineers do and undo gender: Consequences for gender equality. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(4), 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00406.x>

- Emerging sectors like green technologies present unique challenges, often intersecting with technological domains that have historically been male-dominated. These sectors frequently require technical expertise and are embedded in networks that have traditionally excluded women.

D. Finance and Investment Sectors

- Financial services and investment ecosystems represent another critical area of women's entrepreneurial underrepresentation, for reasons similar to the above.

E. Participation in Informal and Shadow Economies

- Women's engagement in informal economies, including sex work and other marginalised economic activities, represents a complex intersection of economic survival, systemic exclusion, and entrepreneurial resilience.¹⁷
- This participation is often driven by: limited formal employment opportunities, persistent gender-based economic discrimination, lack of access to traditional financial resources, caregiving responsibilities restricting formal employment, and other intersectional challenges.
- Work in these sectors often comes with significant personal safety risks, absence of legal protections, limited access to benefits, social stigma and potential criminal prosecution, and economic precarity and exploitation.
- Although sex work and informal economic activities are often stigmatised, they should be understood as critical survival strategies and forms of economic agency for many women and treated as such.

3. How can women best be supported to overcome the challenges they face in securing funding to start and grow their businesses?

There is a need for targeted interventions to challenge embedded gender power systems in funding ecosystems. However, both systemic (investor-level) and individual (founder-level) interventions in the unequal funding landscape are required, as too frequently only founder level interventions are on offer.

Government bodies could work directly with investors to recognise and mitigate unconscious biases, develop more inclusive investment approaches, and educate them about market opportunities in communities of interest to women entrepreneurs.

Proactive outreach programmes can actively seek out women entrepreneurs, provide localised, contextual support and build on local knowledge and community connections. Longer term funding is a condition for success here.

At the same time, they could provide individual level support to women entrepreneurs, for example offering strategic guidance on pushing back against gendered expectations, navigating equity and angel funding challenges, increasing awareness of diverse funding mechanisms, and understanding lender perspectives and decision-making processes.

4. What examples are there of best practice in supporting female-led entrepreneurship, both in the UK and internationally?

Characteristics of Successful Initiatives

¹⁷ Jones, S., & Nadin, S. (2024). "I'd like to make a proper go of it but it's really scary": the perpetual liminality of informally self-employed women as stigmatized entrepreneurs. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2024.2425945>

- Targeted, gender-specific entrepreneurship support
- Programme design with direct input from intended beneficiaries¹⁸
- Long-term, sustainable funding models
- Comprehensive support including and beyond financial assistance, e.g. childcare and participation compensation, comprehensive network building
- Understanding of regional economic landscapes
- Addressing intersectional barriers to entrepreneurship

Standout organisations and initiatives

- The Women's Organisation (UK-wide); Women in Business NI (Northern Ireland); Women in Business Scotland
- [Charter for Inclusive Entrepreneurship](#)¹⁹ - A Charter designed to create a more inclusive UK ecosystem that can provide productive and fair access for those individuals seeking to start or grow their business, irrespective of their personal characteristics, categories of social belonging or location (e.g. women, ethnic minority founders, disabled, urban/rural, young/old etc.).

5. What steps should the Government take to help support the development of female-led high growth enterprises?

Recommendation	Potential Interventions
Targeted Funding Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Develop comprehensive, accessible funding programmes specifically designed for women entrepreneurs. □ Move towards investing in potential rather than exclusively in proven success □ Provide early-stage capital and other support for businesses in conceptual and development phases, □ Explore the creation of government-funded equity support and flexible, low-barrier financial products □ Create dedicated investment pools with gender-sensitive criteria □ Support women angel investment groups
Holistic Support Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Establish a national consortium of partners from Government, business sectors, entrepreneurship ecosystem (EE), and academia to drive and share best practices with devolved administrations, EE support agents, and funders □ Ensure local council business support programmes are incorporating gender-aware approaches, mentorship and advisory services. Provide wraparound support beyond traditional financial metrics

¹⁸ Dy, A. M. (2020). *Learning from OneTech: Recommendations for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives in Tech and Start-Up*. <https://phdy.work/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/1t-lu-ldn-policy-brief-final.pdf>

¹⁹ Treanor, L. and Burkinshaw, H. (2023). *Charter for inclusive entrepreneurship*. Nottingham, University of Nottingham. Available at: [Charter-for-Inclusive-Entrepreneurship-full-booklet.pdf](#)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Establish sector-specific funding pools exclusively supporting women entrepreneurs, and encourage investors to critically examine their investment practices □ Create transparent evaluation frameworks for investors that mitigate demographic prejudices □ Develop incentive structures for organisations supporting women in challenging sectors □ Implement monitoring mechanisms to track gender diversity in entrepreneurial support
Childcare and Social Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Implement good quality, flexible, affordable childcare solutions □ Create supportive policies for women entrepreneurs with caregiving responsibilities □ Tailor maternity leave and benefit policies to support women's entrepreneurial aspirations □ Reducing attendance barriers to support programming for disadvantaged communities
Network and Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Establish targeted networking platforms □ Develop skills enhancement programmes, with specialised training in digital technologies and entrepreneurial management □ Create safe, accessible spaces for women entrepreneurs to connect and grow
Institutional Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Mandate gender-awareness training for business support agents □ Develop comprehensive monitoring of support effectiveness based on gender-disaggregated data collection □ Ensure proactive, targeted support for multiply disadvantaged women □ Create transparent reporting mechanisms. Require detailed demographic reporting from investment and support entities. □ Disseminate insights to inform policy and support strategies □ Implement mandatory gender-disaggregated data collection across business support and funding providers □ Create standardised reporting mechanisms for tracking women's entrepreneurship metrics □ Establish an independent oversight committee to monitor and analyse entrepreneurship data
Educational and Cultural Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Media campaigns challenging sector-specific stereotypes. Specific focus on reducing legitimacy bias and investor funding disparities □ Address pipeline issues in STEMM and manufacturing to

	<p>translate women's engagement into entrepreneurship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Integrate entrepreneurship and sector diversity education from early academic stages
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6. What data exists or is required to track success and monitor progress in female entrepreneurship?

Existing Data Sources

- Longitudinal Small Business Survey²⁰
- Office of National Statistics: self-employment data²¹
- UK Longitudinal Household Study Data – self-employment reporting²²
- Global Entrepreneurship Monitor²³

Critical Data Gaps

- Minimal local authority-level data
- Insufficient gender-disaggregated information on: business support recipients, funding access, investment demographics

March 2025

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/small-business-survey-2023-businesses-with-no-employees/longitudinal-small-business-survey-businesses-with-no-employees-uk-2023>

²¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/employeesandselfemployedbyindustryemp14>

²² <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

²³ <https://www.gemconsortium.org/report/gem-united-kingdom-20232024-national-report-2>