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POLICY BRIEF

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Empowering Women Entrepreneurs through Inclusive Support Hubs

Executive Summary

Women entrepreneurs contribute to economic growth, innovation, and job creation, yet they remain under represented in entrepreneurial ecosystems and face persistent barriers accessing finance, markets, skills, and networks. They are more likely to operate in lower profit, traditionally 'female concentrated' sectors, while those who enter male dominated sectors can earn substantially higher profits (World Bank 2022).

This policy brief proposes inclusive support hubs compromising physical, virtual, or hybrid one stop platforms that integrate mentoring, skills development, peer networking, finance readiness, and market linkages to reduce structural constraints and enable women led businesses to start, survive, and scale. Global evidence reviews show that bundled approaches (training plus mentoring, networks, and complementary support) are more effective than stand alone training, particularly when designed to address gendered constraints (World Bank 2019, 2022, 2025; OECD 2021; We-Fi 2022; Bill Gates Foundation 2021).

Country examples suggest that ecosystem coordination and targeted programming can strengthen women's business ownership and resilience. For example, Canada's reporting highlights increases in women owned businesses over time (Government of Canada 2024) and India's Women Entrepreneurs (WE) Hub reports large scale incubation and funding facilitation for women entrepreneurs (Times of India 2025).

To maximise impact, hubs should be integrated into broader entrepreneurship ecosystems, designed for accessibility and sustainability, and supported by strong public–private collaboration and robust monitoring and evaluation.

Key Messages

- SMEs are foundational to employment and economic development globally, making inclusive entrepreneurship central to jobs and growth strategies.
- Women entrepreneurs face structural barriers, including sector segregation, constrained finance, limited networks, and weaker market linkages, which reduce enterprise growth and resilience.
- Inclusive support hubs can address these barriers by

delivering bundled support and targeted pathways into higher growth sectors, including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and green economy opportunities.
- Closing entrepreneurship gender gaps could deliver large macroeconomic gains, strengthening the case for scaled, gender responsive interventions

Introduction and Problem Statement

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognised as the backbone of economies, representing a large share of businesses and contributing substantially to employment. The World Bank (2022) reports that SMEs represent approximately 90% of businesses and account for more than half of global employment, underscoring their role in productivity, inclusion, and poverty reduction. International Labour Organisation (ILO 2019) indicates that self employment, micro and small enterprises, and SMEs collectively account for approximately 70% of total employment, reinforcing the employment significance of small economic units. Women entrepreneurs constitute 28% of all businesses globally, making them critically important to economies (World Bank 2019).

Despite progress in women's entrepreneurship over time, gender gaps persist in startup activity, business ownership, and business outcomes across many contexts. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM 2024) reports a long term upward trend in women's startup activity across participating countries but also highlights enduring disparities and barriers that affect women's ability to start and scale ventures. These barriers are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing; they include constraints on finance, skills, networks, and access to markets, as well as gendered norms and institutional design features that shape entrepreneurial opportunities.

Sector segregation and the "glass walls" problem

Women entrepreneurs frequently face "glass walls" that restrict entry into higher value, male dominated sectors, contributing to sectoral segregation and profitability gaps. The World Bank's Breaking Barriers (2022) analysis focuses on sectoral choice as a contributor to gender gaps in business performance and finds that women who cross into male dominated sectors can achieve substantially higher profits than those who remain in female concentrated sectors. This pattern underscores that policy responses must address not only access to entrepreneurship broadly but also pathways into high growth and high productivity sectors.

Scale, productivity, and structural constraints

OECD (2021), We-FI (2025) and the Bill Gates Foundation (Kevane et al 2021) find that women entrepreneurs tend to operate at a smaller scale (e.g., lower sales revenues), with observed gaps partly linked to constraints such as capital and sector concentration. These findings align with broader evidence that gendered differences in access to finance, networks, and experience can constrain enterprise growth trajectories and scaling potential (ILO 2023).

Shocks, resilience, and women's enterprise continuity

Women entrepreneurs can be disproportionately exposed to shocks where sector concentration and unpaid care burdens intersect, including during economic downturns and crises. The OECD (2021) highlights that women entrepreneurs were often hit harder during the COVID 19 pandemic due to sectoral concentration and challenges in accessing emergency liquidity measures, pointing to the importance of resilient, gender responsive support systems. Elam et al (2021) also emphasise that market structures and gendered constraints can limit the effectiveness of gender neutral recovery programmes, reinforcing the need for targeted approaches.

Why Inclusive Support Hubs?

Inclusive support hubs are integrated platforms that combine services and connections that women entrepreneurs need to start, survive, and scale; these platforms are delivered through physical, virtual, or hybrid models. We-Fi (2022) indicates that interventions are more effective when they are bundled, for example, by combining training with mentoring, coaching, networks, and complementary supports that address specific constraints women face. Hubs can provide these bundled services in a coherent pipeline, reducing transaction costs for entrepreneurs and improving the continuity of support across business stages.

Core functions of an inclusive support hub

According to the World Bank (2019, 2022, 2025), OECD (2021), We-Fi (2022) and the Bill Gates Foundation (Kevane et al 2021), inclusive support hubs typically deliver:
- **Skills development** (business, management, digital, and sector specific skills).
- **Mentorship and coaching** (including role models and sector mentors, particularly for entry into male dominated sectors).
- **Peer networks and social capital** (support communities, advisory connections, and ecosystem linkages).
- **Finance readiness and linkages** (financial literacy, documentation support, investor/loan matchmaking).
- **Market access support** (buyer connections, procurement readiness, standards and quality compliance, branding).

Hybrid and virtual delivery to reach underserved women
Women in remote or underserved areas often face compounded barriers to accessing business support, including reduced access to market information, mentoring, and

networks. Hybrid and virtual hub models can expand reach and reduce mobility barriers, supporting continuity during shocks and enabling ongoing advisory and peer support (OECD 2021).

Policy Context: Barriers Hubs Should Address

Based on the evidence above, women face barriers in entrepreneurship including restricted entry into high value male-dominated sectors, structural constraints, and vulnerability to crises. Inclusive support hubs would be effective in improving conditions for women entrepreneurs to succeed. However, these hubs must be configured to offer support and services tailored to women's needs and address the specific challenges highlighted below,

Entrepreneurship training often lacks complementary support

Business training programmes often do not include gender responsive designs or complementary supports that address constraints such as care burdens, restricted mobility, or weaker market networks. We Fi (2022, 2025) highlights that combining training with mentoring and networking can improve outcomes for women entrepreneurs more than training alone.

Market access constraints and information gaps persist

Women entrepreneurs may face barriers to buyer engagement and market participation due to limited networks, restricted mobility, and weaker access to timely market information. Research emphasises that market structures and market behaviour can remain gendered even where formal equality improves, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions that build women's market linkages and bargaining power (Bill Gates Foundation 2022; OECD 2021).

Ecosystem support for women owned businesses is weak

According to the Office on the Economic Status of Women (2016) and OECD (2021), women-owned businesses are often concentrated in sectors characterised by smaller firm size and lower revenues, influenced by education and occupational pathways as well as capital constraints and care responsibilities. This sector and experience pattern can reinforce differences in growth expectations, financing access, and scaling trajectories, making ecosystem support essential.

Research Evidence and Illustrative Hub Models

There are several examples of inclusive hubs for women entrepreneurs that address the persistent challenges highlighted above and can be used as good practice models for other countries in the G20. Such examples include Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, India's WE Hub, EXIST Women Germany, and the Women's Business Centre in Scotland. Closing entrepreneurship gaps with such initiatives has proven to benefit economies.

Canada: ecosystem coordination and women's business ownership

Canada's annual reporting on women's entrepreneurship by the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub highlights measurable changes in women's business ownership. For instance, in 2023, approximately 18.4% of businesses were predominantly owned by women, compared to 15.6% in 2017 (Government of Canada 2024). This evidence supports the value of coordinated strategies and ecosystem infrastructure that strengthen women entrepreneurs' pathways to business formation and sustainability.

India: WE Hub as a state supported incubation model

WE Hub is a state supported platform for women entrepreneurs; it reports its objectives around enabling women founders' access to technical, financial, government, and policy support. Public reporting highlights scale outcomes, such as 6,376 startups and SMEs supported and 1770 million Rupee in funding facilitated – indicating the potential for hubs to expand support at the population level (Times of India 2025).

Germany: EXIST Women

EXIST Women is a novel programme founded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy; it provides scholarships to female founders from a scientific background at higher education institutions and research establishments to help them develop their business mindset and business ideas. The programme provides a 12-month training in establishing businesses, individual coaching, and entrepreneurial support from a female mentor. It provides access to a network of female entrepreneurs nationwide, a once-off grant for material expenses and an optional three-month grant to applicants who do not have income or work (EXIST Women n.d.).

Scotland: Women's Enterprise

In Scotland, the digital Women's Business Centre addresses and supports women's contribution to rebuilding the economy. The programme bridges the gaps in mainstream gender specific business support. This approach provides expert, dedicated support based on local communities, works alongside traditional mainstream support, and offers women the choice of needs-based support as appropriate for their individual business journeys and ambitions (Women's Enterprise Scotland n.d.)

Potential macroeconomic gains from closing entrepreneurship gaps

Boston Consulting Group (BCG 2019) argues that if women and men participated equally as entrepreneurs, global

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could rise by approximately 3% to 6%, equivalent to US$2.5 trillion to US$5 trillion in additional output. This potential gain strengthens the case for scalable policy interventions that remove gendered constraints on entrepreneurship and enterprise growth.

Policy Considerations (Risks and Mitigation)

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OECD (2021) and the Bill Gates Foundation (Kevane et al 2021) report that while hubs are promising, they can face critiques related to accessibility, sustainability, duplication of services, and unintended siloing. To mitigate risks, hub strategies should:

1. **Ensure accessibility and inclusion** through outreach, multilingual support where needed, affordable participation, and hybrid delivery for remote communities.
2. **Avoid duplication** by mapping existing services and integrating hubs into national and local entrepreneurship ecosystems, including referrals and partnerships.
3. **Strengthen sustainability** through diversified funding (public, private, and philanthropic) and clear governance and performance accountability.
4. **Prevent inequitable selection effects** by adopting transparent criteria and tracking who benefits, including rural women and other underserved groups.
5. **Build resilience to shocks** by institutionalising virtual support, peer communities, and rapid advisory capabilities for crisis response.

Policy Recommendations (G20 Focus)

To foster inclusive entrepreneurship through support hubs, G20 countries and partners should:

1. **Allocate dedicated funding** for inclusive entrepreneurship hubs, prioritising underserved geographies and marginalised communities.
2. **Develop capacity building and mentorship programmes** that equip women with skills, networks, and sector exposure, especially for entry into higher growth STEM and green economy opportunities.
3. **Create inclusive incubation and acceleration tracks** offering tailored advisory services, co working or shared facilities, and structured growth support across venture stages.
4. **Strengthen market access pathways,** including procurement readiness, buyer matchmaking, and support to meet quality, standards, and volume requirements through aggregation or cooperative models where appropriate.
5. **Improve regulatory accessibility** by streamlining licensing and registration and reducing burdens that disproportionately affect women entrepreneurs, including through guidance and awareness campaigns.
6. **Embed robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL)** across hub programmes, tracking outcomes disaggregated by gender and relevant intersecting factors to support continuous improvement.

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