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Bridging the Divide: Women, Technology and Business Success

2023 Audit of Women Entrepreneurs in Low and Middle Income Countries



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The Cherie Blair Foundation for Women works together with women entrepreneurs in low and middle income countries to reach their potential. With our partners we are committed to eliminating the global gender gap in entrepreneurship and creating a future where women entrepreneurs thrive.

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Front cover image: Frida Owinga, Founder of Passion Profit and Foundation alumna, Kenya



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Abbreviations and acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
GBV	Gender based violence
LMIC	Low and/or middle income country/ies
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths



Foreword

The pursuit of women's economic empowerment and justice is not simply a matter of equal pay and boardroom representation, it is a journey through complex intersections of patriarchal structures, societal norms, cultural barriers, systemic inequality and access to the digital tools that shape the economic landscape. While research shows that strides have been made, millions of women around the world face significant barriers to achieving their full economic potential. Sustainable development cannot be realised without women participating equally in social, political and economic spheres of life. We must not and cannot afford to leave half the population at the starting line.

This report identifies successes and challenges that women entrepreneurs faced in 2023 and proposes possible solutions to the identified barriers. The report reveals that challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are further amplified in low and middle income countries (LMICs), where limited access to education and financial services, and gaps in legal protections create additional hurdles. The report is a stark reminder of why we must actively dismantle the obstacles hindering women's economic participation and provide vital tools and training to level the playing field. A crucial area of focus of this research is access to technology, which can drive women entrepreneurs' progress faster and more intuitively than ever before. Reviewed literature indicates that the digital revolution has transformed economic realities, creating new avenues for entrepreneurship, innovation, and career advancement. The emergence of digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) presents a paradigm shift, brimming with immense potential to accelerate progress in women's economic empowerment and justice. Yet, the digital gender divide persists and many online spaces are still unsafe for women, hence many are missing out.

This report delves into this intricate terrain, focusing on the crucial role of digital tools and emerging technologies. It highlights women entrepreneurs' desires to better access and utilise technology to bolster their business success. As AI rapidly reshapes industries, from healthcare and finance to agriculture and education, the need to ensure equitable access and ethical development becomes paramount. We must most importantly bridge the gender divide in technology in order to address the gap between women and AI, not only as users but also as creators and innovators. Could you imagine the transformative potential that would be unlocked if women were fully empowered to shape the very technologies impacting their lives, livelihoods, and communities?

This report lays out a roadmap for revolutionary systemic change, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts to ensure women



entrepreneurs are able to reach their full potential. It urges policymakers, business leaders, educators, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals to collaborate to ensure women have access to gender-specific entrepreneurship support, safe online spaces to network and conduct business, and access to digital financial services.

We believe that by harnessing the power of technology and fostering an inclusive digital ecosystem, we can unlock a future where women are not only participants in the economy, but active architects of its progress. Let us embrace the challenge, celebrate the possibilities, and embark on this journey towards a more just and equitable economic landscape for all.

Finally, we thank the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women and Intuit for this important evidence based research and hope that all who read it are galvanised to take action in providing solutions to barriers to women's economic empowerment and particularly unlocking the potential for AI and its responsible use by women entrepreneurs.

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Executive summary

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 2023 was a **difficult year for many women entrepreneurs** in low and middle income countries (LMICs) to navigate. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic and geopolitical crises have had a significant impact on women and girls in multifarious ways, leading to major setbacks for gender parity globally. According to the latest Global Gender Gap Report¹, progress on political empowerment is effectively at a standstill, and women's economic participation has regressed rather than recovered.

In the current dynamic global business landscape, the widespread utilisation of artificial intelligence (AI), including generative AI, has taken centre stage, with exciting new tools appearing regularly. Similar to the 19th and 20th centuries' industrial revolutions and the advent of the second generation of the World Wide Web in the 21st century, the AI transformation has the potential to create both winners and losers. The digital revolution brings immense potential to improve social and economic outcomes for women. Yet, it also poses the risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality: The World Economic Forum² suggests that women account for only 26% of data and AI positions in the workforce.

44.4%

44.4% of respondents said they already use generative AI tools in business operations.

Within this era of technological advancement, there is an important opportunity to understand how emerging technologies, particularly AI,

¹ World Economic Forum (2023) 'Global Gender Gap Report 2023'.

² World Economic Forum (2020) 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020'.

impact women entrepreneurs in LMICs. This report seeks to cast a spotlight on the broader influence of technology, including AI, on the ventures of women entrepreneurs in LMICs. It navigates the intricate landscape of gender disparities and discrimination, online safety and the myriad successes as well as barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. Moreover, it addresses the pivotal components of training, resources and practices that are indispensable for digital inclusion, and more generally, empowering and uplifting women entrepreneurs in these geographies.

Based on responses from 1,156 women entrepreneurs across 81 low and middle income countries in late 2023, key findings and recommendations are as follows:

Business successes in 2023

The key factors influencing women's business successes in 2023 included enhanced access to business networks and increased digital inclusion:

- **Business networks:** A significant 32.8% attributed success to improved access to business networks, both virtual and in-person.
- **Digital inclusion:** Another 24.4% highlighted increased digital inclusion as a key factor in business success, which emphasises the growing importance of digital platforms, connectivity and e-commerce as tools for strengthening businesses and business practice.

32.8%

32.8% of respondents attributed the success of their business in 2023 to improved access to virtual and in-person business networks.

Business challenges in 2023

The Foundation's 2022 report³ highlighted key challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, gender discrimination, high inflation, and unpaid care work. In 2023, broader issues arose alongside ongoing challenges:

³ Cherie Blair Foundation for Women (2022) 'Resilience & Determination in the Face of Global Challenges'.



- **Access to finance:** The most significant challenge for women in 2023 was access to finance, with 25.6% of women facing this issue.
- **Macroeconomic environment:** 13.3% reported experiencing challenges related to the macroeconomic environment, such as inflation, making it the second-biggest challenge.
- **Customer retention:** Another 11.4% identified retaining customers as their most critical challenge.

Technology and digital access

91.2%

92.1% of respondents reported owning smartphones for business use.

We find a significant reliance on digital tools among women entrepreneurs, including a substantial adoption of AI, with key barriers to internet access including cost constraints and network disruptions:

- **High internet usage:** The study reveals a significant reliance on digital tools, with 92.8% reporting daily internet usage, predominantly on smartphones (92.1%).
- **Barriers to internet access:** Costs (69.1%) and network disruptions (67.3%) are significant barriers to internet access, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges.
- **AI adoption:** We find a significant **44.4% adoption of AI tools**, indicating a positive trend toward embracing advanced technologies for various business purposes.

“ I use AI to create and design activities for my school. ”
A woman entrepreneur from Pakistan

-
- **Training needs for AI:** The primary barrier to AI adoption is the need for more training (65.5%), emphasising the importance of educational initiatives to enhance women’s understanding of and proficiency in using AI tools to power their businesses.

65.5%

65.5% of respondents cited the need for more training as the primary barrier preventing them from using generative AI tools.

Gender dynamics

In 2023, women entrepreneurs continued to encounter gender discrimination and online gender based violence (GBV), necessitating sustained efforts for its eradication:

- **Gender discrimination:** 28.5% of women reported facing gender based discrimination in the last year, emphasising the need for sustained efforts to eliminate such challenges. Incidents reported include scepticism about women’s capabilities and struggles in male-dominated sectors.
- **Digital gender based violence** High awareness of harmful online behaviours that target women aligns with high reported frequency of personal experiences (67.4%), with 14% experiencing or witnessing online GBV daily and 45.4% of respondents reporting these incidences had an impact on their business success. These experiences include sharing/threatening to share offensive materials, sexist/hateful language, stalking and harassment and creating manipulated content.

Strategic areas for intervention

This report suggests strategic areas for intervention including those that will support women to overcome traditional barriers, as well as new barriers emerging: Targeted training initiatives to address digital literacy gaps around AI and related technologies, support for financial inclusion and access to business networks, and ongoing efforts to combat gender discrimination and online GBV are crucial. Below we summarise our key calls to action:



1. **Design gender-specific, women-centred programmes and implement these with maximum accessibility**, promoting the adoption of digital financial services and digital tools for women entrepreneurs. These should be incentivised through supportive policies and investments from private and public sectors.
2. **Launch targeted training in AI-enabled tools for women entrepreneurs** covering content creation, design, and customer services to upskill women and to combat the impacts of a gender divide in AI access and use to drive business growth.
3. **Invest in improving coverage of internet services, specifically in mobile broadband and fibre-optic internet infrastructure**, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Extend hardware support to women through initiatives that provide greater access to smartphones, laptops, desktops, or tablets for women entrepreneurs.
4. **Develop and deliver digital tools, datasets and training with a women-centred design approach**—emphasising the need for gender diversity in AI development—to meet the rising demand for technology among women entrepreneurs (which is identified in this research to grow by 37.2% in 2024).
5. **Create opportunities for women entrepreneurs to expand their networks** through new or existing associations or interest groups. Grow public and private sector investment in networks that offer technical assistance, guidance and soft skills development.
6. **Call out and combat gender stereotypes, discrimination and online GBV** that inhibit women’s ability to start, sustain and grow their businesses. Ensure that women are able to access online spaces related to their businesses safely and without fear or experience of abuse and harassment.

“ I run a clothing line business. Oftentimes I'm faced with gender-based harassment on social media, including online stalking, unsolicited explicit messages, and derogatory comments, highlighting the persistence of gender discrimination in online spaces. ”
A woman entrepreneur from Nigeria



Introduction

Background

Women entrepreneurs in LMICs continue to strive for—and often achieve—business success. This is despite facing enormous obstacles due to global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, conflicts, displacement, and high inflation, all of which are rolling back efforts to achieve gender equality. The Global Gender Gap Report⁴ estimates that, at the current rate of progress, it will take another 169 years to reach economic gender parity. Despite the existence of hundreds of millions of women-owned enterprises, a significant \$1.7 trillion USD global credit gap exists.⁵ In many markets, banks require assets like land titles as collateral for loans, posing an extra challenge for women who own only about 1% of registered land titles.⁶

Despite significant challenges, there is untapped potential for women's entrepreneurship, with 17% of women in LMICs currently working as entrepreneurs and an additional 35% aspiring to become entrepreneurs.⁷ The World Bank Gender Strategy 2024-2030 highlights that there is a need to accelerate progress by addressing the root causes of inequality and promoting gender-responsive policies, bridging gaps in legal rights, technology access, and entrepreneurial opportunities.⁸

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies, including recent advancements in AI, is opening new avenues for businesses to grow and expand their operations. AI-enabled tools hold the potential to enhance productivity, reduce costs, and elevate customer satisfaction. According to a recent report by Forbes magazine,⁹ the AI market is projected to reach \$407 billion USD by 2027, experiencing substantial growth from its estimated \$86.9 billion USD revenue in 2022. Recent reports, including the 2024

⁴ World Economic Forum (2023) 'Global Gender Gap Report 2023'.

⁵ International Finance Corporation (2017) 'MSME Finance Gap'.

⁶ Goldman Sachs (2023) 'The gender credit gap is holding back growth worldwide'.

⁷ Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2020/21) 'Women entrepreneurship report: Thriving through crisis'.

⁸ World Bank (2023) 'World Bank Gender Strategy 2024 – 2030: Accelerate Gender Equality for a Sustainable, Resilient and Inclusive Future'.

⁹ Forbes Advisor (2023) '24 Top AI Statistics And Trends In 2024'.

World Economic Forum meetings,¹⁰ highlight AI's potential to augment human capabilities, contribute to drug discovery insights, and aid decision-making.¹¹ AI is seen as a driver for economic growth, healthcare improvement, enhanced education, and, crucially for this piece, inclusive innovation in low and middle income countries.^{12, 13}

Disparities in access to new technological tools: An economic divide

Technology-enabled entrepreneurship offers a powerful means to bolster women's involvement in the digital economy, providing new business prospects, operational efficiencies, and enhanced access to global markets. Despite these opportunities, the underrepresentation of women maximising technology opportunities for business growth hinders economic prospects—particularly in LMICs—potentially worsening existing gender disparities.

“Online I did not face any discrimination because they do not know if I am a man or woman, the problem came when we met in person. They were surprised and disappointed when there was no male present, one even went to ask if my partner was running late.”

A woman entrepreneur from Botswana

Addressing this gender divide necessitates an understanding of how to amplify women's engagement in the digital economy and narrow the gender gap within the digital sphere. This imperative aligns with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Importantly, the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women¹⁴ in 2024 will focus on accelerating gender equality by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender lens. Women's entrepreneurship is a crucial path out of poverty and offers a highly effective way to foster economic independence for women, emphasising the crucial need for heightened attention to the impacts of such

¹⁰ World Economic Forum (2024) 'Davos 2024: Here's the impact on-ground across AI, climate, growth and global security'.

¹¹ World Economic Forum (2021) '6 positive AI visions for the future of work'.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ World Economic Forum (2024) 'Davos 2024: Here's the impact on-ground across AI, climate, growth and global security'.

¹⁴ UN Women (2024) 'CSW68 2024'.

technology on women and girls and its ability to level the playing field for women.

Gender, entrepreneurship and AI

It is vital to acknowledge that the utility of AI-enabled tools is not uniform across the global landscape, highlighting the need for equitable access, training and integration. While businesses in high income countries may have greater access to infrastructure and resources to fully harness the potential of AI, those in LMICs may encounter challenges in adoption, limiting their ability to leverage these transformative technologies. Ethical development and inclusive deployment of AI are imperative to prevent the exacerbation of existing economic inequalities across the world. A thorough examination of the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs based in LMICs in accessing digital tools and technologies, as well as the enabling factors that can enhance the growth of women-led enterprises in the digital sphere, is vital for deepening the global understanding of inclusion, access and education for women.

Although there has been much interest in women's entrepreneurship and the gender digital divide, there is a lack of focus on the interaction between women entrepreneurs and their access to new digital tools and technologies. For example, there is very little research or knowledge regarding the needs of women entrepreneurs in understanding, accessing and using digital technologies and AI-related tools, such as ChatGPT, in LMICs.

“ Used as a base for content development and research. ”
A woman entrepreneur from South Africa

Digital tools, in particular AI, hold great promise and can improve productivity, work-life balance and safety for women. However they can also exacerbate gender inequalities for women entrepreneurs in LMICs through the perpetuation of biases present in historical data. As discussed at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2024, algorithms trained on biased datasets may lead to discriminatory outcomes in various aspects. This includes access to capital, recruitment processes and marketing strategies for women entrepreneurs. If AI systems reflect and reinforce existing gender disparities, they can contribute to the continuation of unequal opportunities for women in entrepreneurship. The potential for biased decision-making in funding, hiring and product development poses a significant challenge. Presently, women hold only 22% of worldwide AI



positions while men hold 78%.¹⁵ It is essential to prioritise gender diversity in AI development for LMICs, ensuring inclusive datasets and fostering a gender-inclusive approach to technology design. These gender disparities align with notable gender gaps in older technologies, such as mobile phone ownership and internet use. The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023¹⁶ highlights that the gender gap in mobile internet remains relatively unchanged from 2022 to 2023 with women in LMICs 19% less likely to use it. The gender gap in smartphone ownership has also stalled, with women in LMICs being 17% less likely than men to own a smartphone.

Aims of this report

In this report, we aim to understand the broad spectrum of business successes and challenges that women entrepreneurs in LMICs faced in 2023 within the context of a challenging macroeconomic landscape. Where possible, we compare responses from the Foundation's previous annual audit reports, identifying opportunities for the future.

We aim to bridge the gap in understanding of women entrepreneurs' access to and use of digital tools by exploring current access and barriers to digital devices, the internet, digital tools in the market, business operations, and other aspects of business. We also seek insights into awareness and demands for AI among women entrepreneurs. This encompasses their role not only as technology consumers but also as producers, and how that can reshape global society and profoundly impact LMICs. Crucially, we also examine experiences of gender discrimination and uncover the prevalence of experiences of online GBV impacting women entrepreneurs.

¹⁵ World Economic Forum (2022) 'Why we must act now to close the gender gap in AI'.

¹⁶ GSMA (2023) 'The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023'.



Methodology

The data underlying this report was collected through an online survey that aimed to address gaps in our existing understanding of key issues facing women entrepreneurs. The survey covered (1) the challenges women entrepreneurs faced during 2023, (2) how women entrepreneurs utilised technology and digital tools in their operations, including generative AI-based tools, and (3) hindrances faced by women entrepreneurs to adopting new technologies, including the threat of online GBV or harassment.

We collected data for this report through a survey run through SurveyMonkey, promoting it in November and December 2023. The survey was made available in English, French, and Spanish. We disseminated the survey to women entrepreneurs in LMICs primarily through social media and emails, utilising the Foundation's own channels as well as those generously offered by the Foundation's partners in support.

Based on responses from 1,156 women entrepreneurs across 81 low and middle income countries, we employed a convenience sampling method. This suggests that our sample is not necessarily representative of the total population of women entrepreneurs across LMICs. It is likely that women whose experiences are covered in this research have been in contact with and supported by the Foundation, potentially positioning their businesses in a more resilient, sustainable and lucrative state. This may also lead to a higher representation of women running formal businesses than is typical in LMICs.

Furthermore, the online-only availability of the survey resulted in a sample with internet access, generally more urbanised, wealthier and better educated. The data we collected in the demographic sections of the survey confirm this trend, that is, respondents reported a higher socioeconomic status than is typical amongst women entrepreneurs in LMICs.

The survey design maintained consistency with the Foundation's past surveys, particularly in relation to questions on demographics and substantive challenges women face in entrepreneurship, as well as certain aspects of gender discrimination. This approach allows for comparison of findings across multiple years.

We also introduced new sections, such as those on generative AI and tackling online GBV. These sections included questions not previously asked by us or others, enabling us to innovate and gain new insights into the evolving role of technology amongst women entrepreneurs.

Findings

3.1 Who are the women entrepreneurs surveyed?

We received responses from women entrepreneurs in **81 different LMICs**. This is an incredibly diverse geographical distribution with notable concentrations from large African countries such as Nigeria (34.1% of respondents), Kenya (14.3%) and South Africa (4.2%). These are countries where the Foundation is currently delivering services with partners, as is Guyana (6.3%). The fifth most represented country was Uganda (3.2%). Further strong representation came from South and Central America, as well as parts of Asia and Europe.

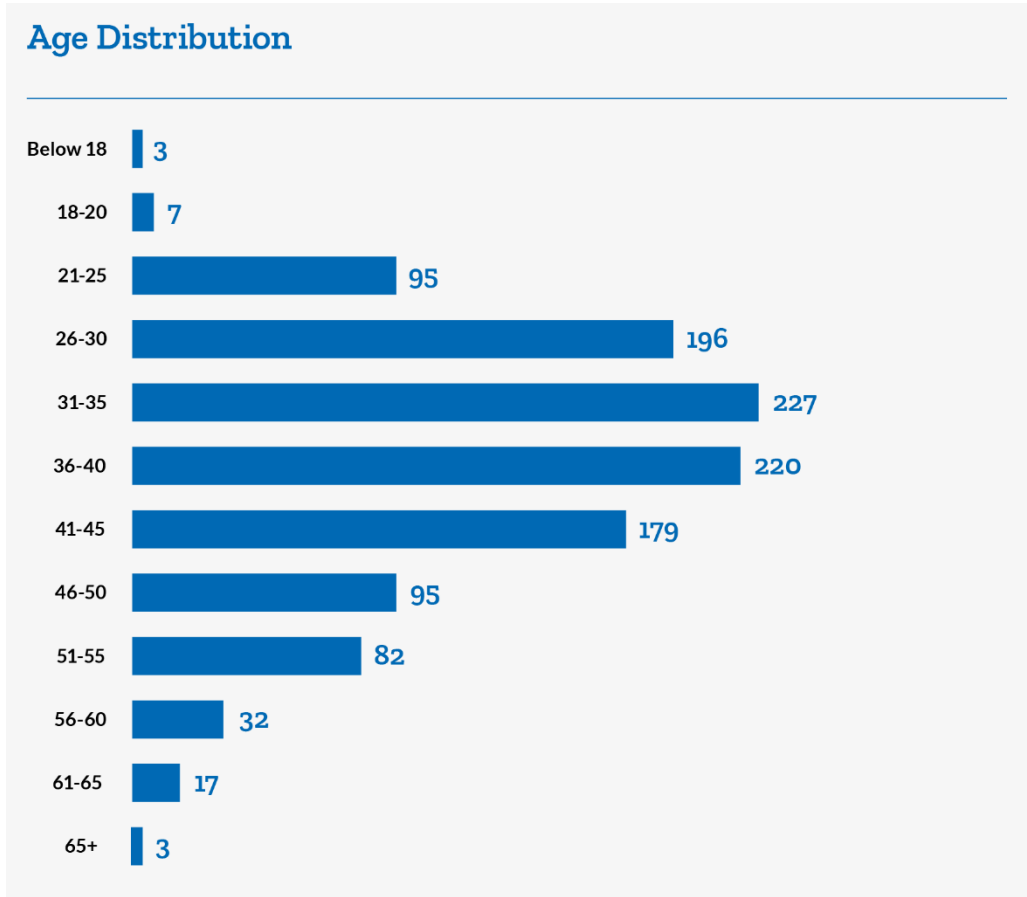
Locations of Respondents



- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Afghanistan | Dominican Republic | Madagascar | Sierra Leone |
| Algeria | Ecuador | Malawi | South Africa |
| American Samoa | Egypt | Malaysia | South Sudan |
| Argentina | Eswatini | Mali | Sri Lanka |
| Bangladesh | Ethiopia | Mauritania | St Lucia |
| Belarus | Fiji | Mexico | St Vincent and the Grenadines |
| Belize | Georgia | Morocco | Suriname |
| Benin | Ghana | Mozambique | Tanzania |
| Bhutan | Grenada | Myanmar | Timor-Leste |
| Bolivia | Guyana | Nepal | Togo |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Honduras | Nigeria | Tunisia |
| Botswana | India | North Macedonia | Turkey |
| Brazil | Indonesia | Pakistan | Uganda |
| Burundi | Jamaica | Papua New Guinea | Vanuatu |
| Cambodia | Jordan | Peru | Venezuela |
| Cameroon | Kenya | Philippines | Vietnam |
| Chad | Kiribati | Republic of the Congo | Yemen |
| Colombia | Kyrgyz Republic | Rwanda | Zambia |
| Democratic Republic of the Congo | Lebanon | Samoa | Zimbabwe |
| Dominica | Lesotho | Senegal | |
| | Liberia | Serbia | |



The results reveal a **diverse spectrum of entrepreneurial pursuits** among these women, with agriculture, food and drink, and clothing and tailoring emerging as the three most prominent sectors in which they operate. Notably, the respondent sample features a substantial presence of women entrepreneurs in beauty and creative industries such as fashion, arts and crafts.

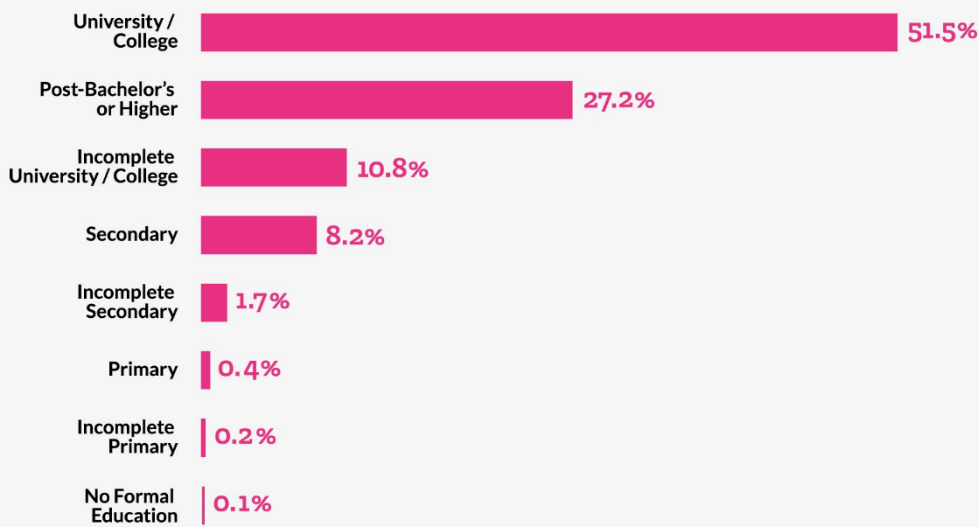


The age distribution analysis reveals that the majority of women entrepreneurs in our sample belong to younger age cohorts, with 38% falling within the 31-40 years bracket. In the broader context of LMICs, women in their 30s form around 23% of the total population of working age women.¹⁷ This suggests a substantial and distinct representation. This survey data also highlights significant representation from those aged 25 to 55, with limited responses from teenagers or senior populations.

¹⁷ World Bank (2022) 'World Development Indicators'.



Highest Level of Education

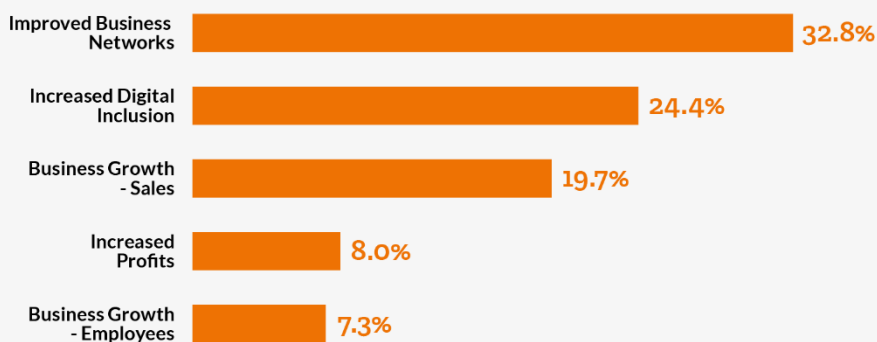


The survey indicates that a substantial **78.5% of women entrepreneurs surveyed have completed a university education and 83.3% live in urban areas**. This points to a predominantly well-educated sample belonging to a higher socioeconomic group within each country. Only 16.2% of respondents reside in rural areas, where internet connectivity tends to be more limited.

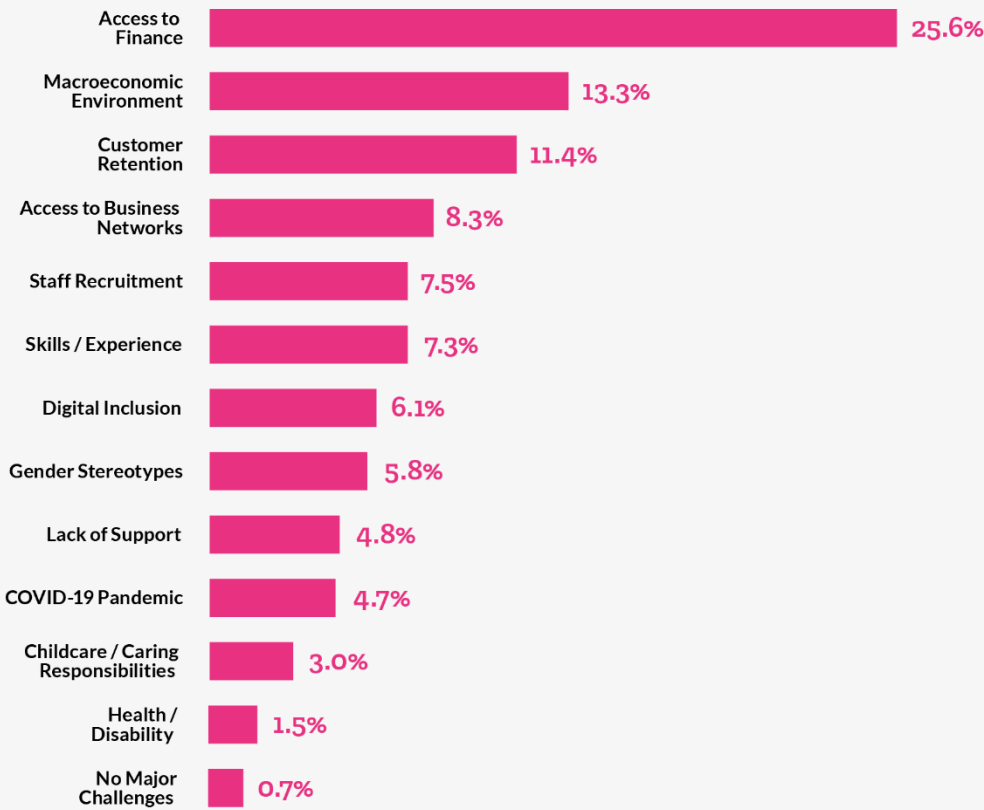
3.2 Business successes and challenges during 2023

Conducted in late 2023, the survey asked women entrepreneurs to assess their key successes and challenges, both to identify ways to improve their entrepreneurship experiences and to assess their general sentiments toward their businesses. When asked about sources of **business success**, 32.8% attributed it to improved access to business networks, both virtual and in-person. Another 24.4% highlighted increased digital inclusion as a key factor, which emphasises the growing importance of digital platforms, connectivity, and e-commerce as tools for strengthening businesses.

Top Business Successes in 2023



Top Business Challenge in 2023



Compared to the Foundation’s 2022 survey, conducted with a similar set of respondents, a noticeable shift in **entrepreneurial challenges** is evident. In 2022, predominant concerns were the immediate and industry-specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a significant focus on sectors vulnerable to lockdowns and restrictions, as well as high inflation and equitable access to finance. The entrepreneurial landscape in 2023 is similarly characterised by a broad set of challenges. Lack of access to finance was the most frequently reported and highest ranked challenge faced by women entrepreneurs in 2023, followed by a difficult macroeconomic environment, and retention of customers.

This continued shift from pandemic-related challenges to **broader economic concerns** can be attributed to the heightened levels of inflation¹⁸ experienced in leading respondent countries. For instance, Nigeria faced an inflation rate of 18.8%, followed by Kenya (7.7%), South Africa (7%) and Guyana (6.1%). Interestingly, only 2% of respondents shared that they did

¹⁸ World Bank (2022) ‘Inflation, consumer prices’.



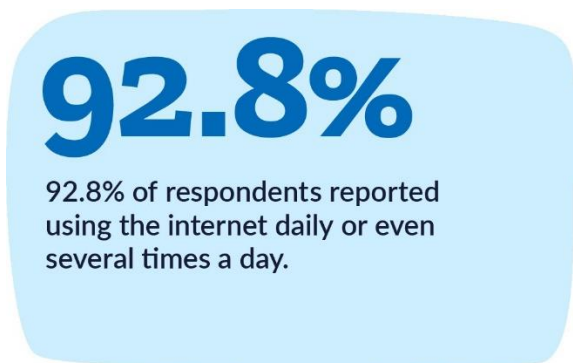
not face any major challenges throughout the year, indicating an incredibly challenging business environment.

It is important to note that access to finance poses a persistent challenge for women entrepreneurs globally, not specific to LMICs. Despite advancements, women encounter barriers such as reduced funding, higher interest rates, and increased collateral demands when seeking debt and equity financing, making it a universal issue. Notably, even in growth-oriented sectors like STEM, women entrepreneurs receive only about 2% of total venture capitalist investments, with funding amounts 30% lower than their male counterparts.¹⁹

When asked about ways to address these challenges, women entrepreneurs' overwhelming demand was the **need for financial support (financing without the expectation of direct financial returns)**, at 80.4%, followed by financial investment, at 47.7%. This is consistent with other recent international reports on small business and entrepreneurial conditions, where the higher cost of borrowing and inflation are found to be increasing business expenses.²⁰ The next most reported need to address the challenges faced was access to entrepreneurs' networks and associations (52.1%). This again highlights the importance of business networks, as it was also the second most popular reason for business success in 2023. Another interesting finding was the very high need for skills or training support (46%) as well as mentorship and coaching (47.6%). In addition, the need for safer online spaces, e.g. platforms where they can utilise business services without fear of sexual harassment, was highlighted by 25.9% of respondents.

3.3 Technology and digital access

3.3.1 Internet and digital tools

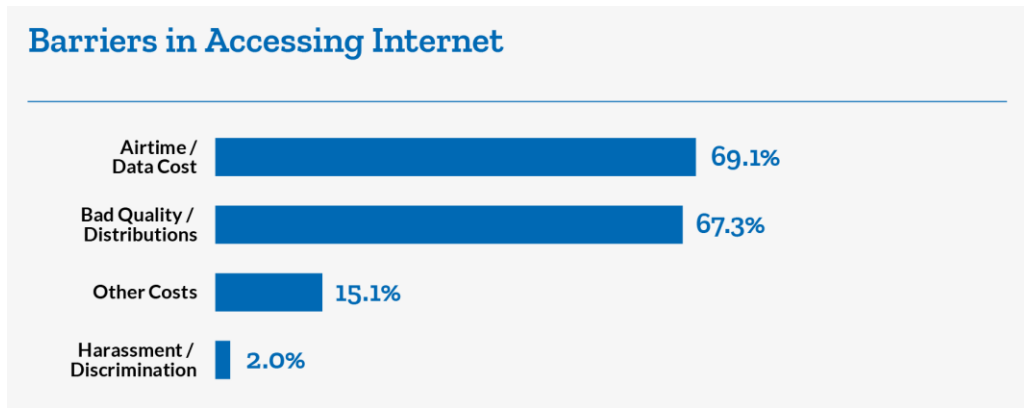


¹⁹ OECD Library (2023) 'Joining Forces for Gender Equality What is Holding us Back?'.
²⁰ Akcigit et al., (2023) 'Intuit QuickBooks Small Business Index Annual Report 2023'.



The vast majority of respondents (92.8%) **use the internet daily** or several times a day, indicating a high frequency of online engagement. Conversely, a nearly negligible percentage (0.3%) reported using the internet once a month or less, which confirms that the respondents have a high level of connectivity and are all using online services and platforms in their business, regardless of other factors.

The survey results indicate that the primary barriers women face to internet access are related to costs, with the direct cost of using calling, texting and data services (aka “airtime”) being a significant factor for 69.1% of respondents. In addition, the prevalence of internet disruptions and poor internet quality (67.3%) highlights a significant concern that hampers productivity and affects business operations. Other costs such as transport or taxation associated with purchasing airtime locally contribute to access challenges for 15% of participants. Harassment or discrimination in streets or markets when acquiring airtime or data is reported by a small percentage (2%) of respondents.



The rural-urban breakdown of the data on digital inclusion is presented below, showing that the majority of our survey’s respondents facing these challenges are residing in cities.

Table 1: Barriers to digital inclusion by place of residence

Barriers	Urban	Rural
Airtime/Data Cost	83.0%	17.0%
Other Costs	74.0%	26.0%
Harassment/Discrimination	83.0%	17.0%
Bad Quality/Disruptions	84.0%	16.0%

92.1% of respondents own smartphones—a significant majority—showing the widespread use of these devices for business purposes. Laptops, desktop computers or tablets are also common, with 59.8% owning such devices and using them for business purposes. In contrast, feature phones (without internet access) are less prevalent, owned by only 9% of participants. At 54.5%, a majority of respondents own both smartphones and laptops, desktop computers or tablets, which is consistent with the respondents mostly belonging to relatively high socioeconomic status groups. This also suggests a high level of digital device penetration, with smartphones and computers being the primary tools for business activities. On the other hand, some entrepreneurs reported being unable to afford the devices they require for business use, such as a woman entrepreneur from Rwanda who cited “Lack of enough money to spend on devices that are advanced to help you to access all you need” as a barrier to accessing devices for business purposes for her.

54.5%

54.5% of respondents reported owning both smartphones and laptops / desktop computers / tablets for business purposes.

Regarding the direct and related costs associated with acquiring and maintaining devices for business purposes, **65.7% of respondents identify the direct cost of phones, laptops, or computers as a significant barrier.** This finding aligns with the earlier conclusion that cost remains a major hindrance to internet access. This reflects the lack of formality and underdevelopment of credit markets across many LMICs, where people do not have the ability to purchase phones on instalments, or through service plans, as in many high-income countries where this is the norm²¹.

“Not having access to the latest and genuine devices in the market due to restricted access to finances.

A woman entrepreneur from Uganda

²¹ Banerjee and Duflo (2010) ‘Giving Credit Where It Is Due’. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 24(3): 61-80.



65.7%

65.7% of respondents identified the direct cost of phones, laptops or computers as a significant barrier to acquiring and maintaining devices for business purposes.

The findings also shed light on infrastructure challenges, with 32.7% citing a lack of access to power as hindering business activities.

Harassment and discrimination in streets or markets is reported as a barrier to acquiring technology assets by far fewer respondents, at 2%, and social norms as well as expectations requiring women to share devices at 9.1%.

3.3.2 Choice of digital tools and expenditure

Among digital tools for business, there is **predominant reliance on WhatsApp**, with an overwhelming 85.4% utilising the messaging platform. In comparison, other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) are being used by 79.5% of respondents. While online banking enjoys substantial usage at 46.9%, mobile money and digital payment systems exhibit a comparatively lower adoption rate at 29% and 23.3% respectively. This suggests a **notable opportunity for growth in the digital payment and e-commerce sectors**, along with use of digital tools for customer relationship management, accountancy and website development, all potentially facilitated by targeted interventions or awareness campaigns.

85.4%

85.4% of respondents ranked WhatsApp as their most used digital tool for business.

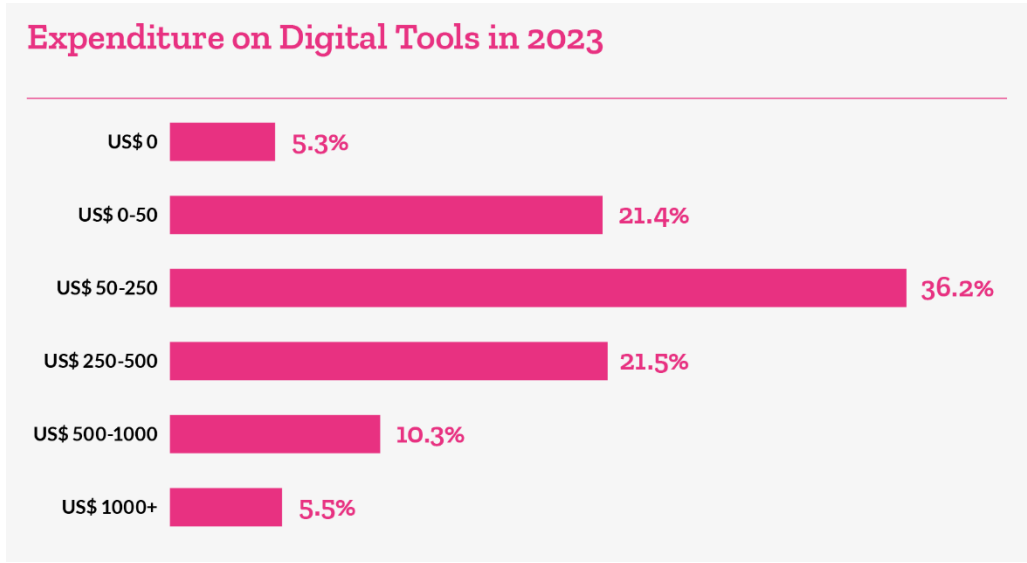
Digital Tools for Business Use



The survey reveals a noteworthy trend in **digital tools expenditure for business purposes** in 2023. A low percentage of respondents, 5.2%, reported spending nothing on these tools annually, emphasising the widespread recognition of the need to financially invest in and use digital tools in business operations. The majority of respondents fall within the lower spending brackets, with 21.3% allocating between \$0-50 USD, 36.1% in the \$50-250 USD range, and 21.4% spending \$250-500 USD per month.



This suggests a market size of \$30 billion USD for digital tools in business for women entrepreneurs in LMICS, assuming that there are 250 million women business owners across all LMICs who will each spend around \$120 USD per month.²²



For the upcoming year, 2024, a substantial **54.1% of respondents expressed the intention to spend more than they did in the previous year** and only 21.5% planned to spend less, indicating a robust and expanding market size in the digital tools sector. As highlighted in the recommendations sections, this indicates that global technology companies could consider developing customised tools for women entrepreneurs in LMICs who are operating in the low-cost, low-bandwidth segment in a new era of expanded digital services and applications.

54.1%
54.1% of respondents expressed the intention to spend more on digital tools in 2024 than they did in 2023.

²² According to the 2021 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, 17% of working-age women report being a women business owner, and another 25% expressed interest in becoming one. Even if we consider just the 17% figure and combine that with World Bank data indicating there are about 1.5 billion women in LMICs, this suggests a potential population of about 250 million women business owners. Source: [GEM \(2020/21\) 'Women's Entrepreneurship Report: Thriving Through Crisis'](#).

With reference to challenges in utilising online tools for their businesses, a significant portion (41.9%) of respondents note **lacking resources**, such as time and money, to keep up with changes and new developments in online tools. This emphasises the financial constraints faced by women entrepreneurs in adopting and adapting to evolving digital technologies. Previous versions²³ of the Foundation's annual audit have shown that women, particularly working mothers, are incredibly time poor, even if they have access to financial resources. To ensure women-owned businesses can compete on a level playing field, efforts should be made to ensure that digital services and tools are rolled out in ways that are accessible to entrepreneurs of any gender.

39.5%

39.5% of respondents identified a deficiency in technical skills as a significant obstacle to effectively utilising digital tools.

Additionally, 39.5% of respondents expressed a **challenge related to technical skills** hindering them from making the best use of digital tools, indicating a need for improved digital literacy and training. A notable 34.4% cited a lack of knowledge and experience in optimising online tools, underlining the importance of **educational support for businesses** in leveraging digital tools effectively.

When asked about the **importance of using digital tools** for various business tasks, respondents exhibited a recognition of the paramount importance of technology across diverse operational aspects of running businesses. From purchasing materials to designing and creating products, managing finances, as well as overseeing vendor and customer relationships, women entrepreneurs demonstrated a strong interest in and need for adapting to new digital solutions.

²³ Cherie Blair Foundation for Women (2022) '**Resilience & Determination in the Face of Global Challenges**'.

97.58%

97.58% of respondents emphasised the importance of utilizing digital tools for vendor and customer relationships.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, amongst this largely digitally literate sample, the vast majority of respondents reported the ability to manage tasks digitally as being important (see table 3). Each of the below business tasks were voted as important to be able to carry out digitally by over 90% of respondents, apart from 'managing staff-related processes'. This highlights a clear consensus on the integral role of digitalisation and a contemporary business landscape where the adoption of digital tools is not just a convenience but a strategic imperative for streamlining operations.

Table 2: Importance of managing tasks digitally

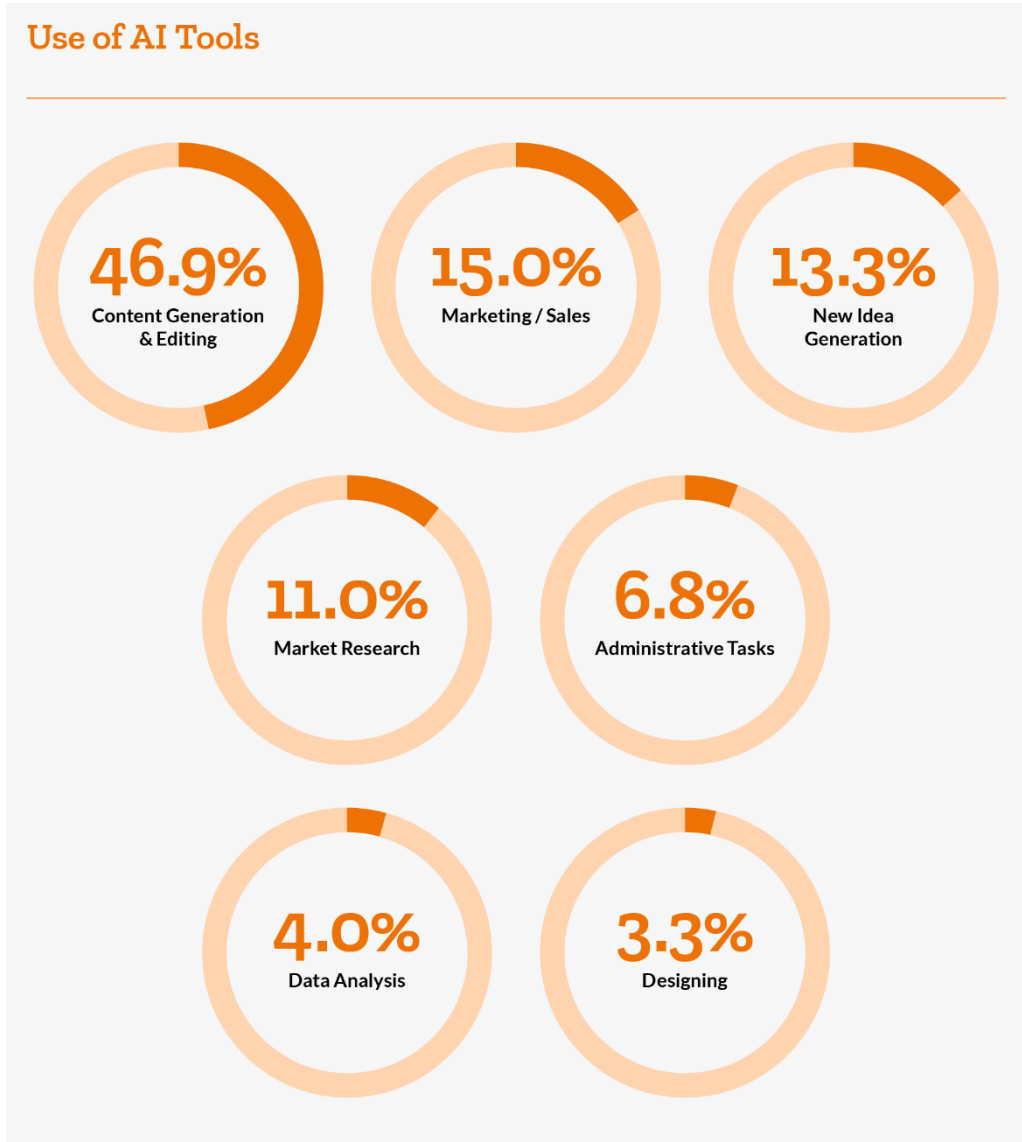
Tasks	Percentage of respondents that voted 'very important' or 'somewhat important'
Vendor/Customer Relationships	97.6%
Marketing, Selling and Delivering Products	97.2%
Managing Finances	96.7%
Managing Information	95.3%
Accessing Suppliers/Procurement Opportunities	94.7%
Procurement and Inventory	93.9%
Designing/Creating Products	92.3%
Managing Staff-Related Processes	87.5%

3.3.3 Artificial intelligence

The survey results indicate a notable adoption of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, among respondents, with 44.4% affirming their usage. This highlights a notable reliance on generative AI as a valuable resource in various professional contexts, reflecting its perceived utility and effectiveness in assisting with content generation and decision support.



A recent survey²⁴ on generative AI usage in the US, UK, Australia and India reveals a divided public opinion, with varying adoption rates across countries; notably, 73% of surveyed individuals in India use generative AI, compared to 49% in Australia, 45% in the US, and 29% in the UK. Moreover, the study identifies AI users as predominantly millennials or gen Z, with 65% falling into these demographics.



²⁴ Salesforce (2023) 'New AI Usage Data Shows Who's Using AI – and Uncovers a Population of 'Super-Users''.

Regarding **applications of generative AI tools in business**, content generation or editing emerges as by far the most prominent use, with 44.9% of respondents utilising it for this purpose. Marketing or sales (15%), new idea generation (13.3%), and market research (11%) also stand out as common applications. The diversity of applications suggests a readiness among respondents to embrace and leverage new technologies for various business functions.

Use of AI Tools - by Sector

Healthcare / Medical



Manufacturing



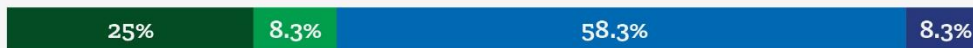
IT & Technology



Consulting



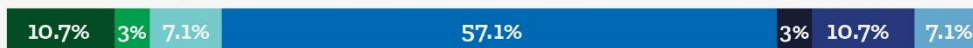
Arts / Crafts



Retail



Education & Training



Clothing / Tailoring



Food / Drink



Beauty / Hair



Agriculture



- Marketing Sales
- Designing
- Market Research
- Content Generation / Editing
- Data Analysis
- Administrative Tasks
- New Idea Generation

The sectoral breakdown of AI tool usage shows that the popularity of content generation is consistent across all of them. As expected, the use of AI tools for marketing and sales applications are highest in the retail sector, and non-existent in the healthcare and consulting industries where such activities are least relevant. Similarly, AI's use in new idea generation is non-existent in retail and arts and crafts, and highest in agriculture and food businesses.

44.9%

44.9% of respondents reported employing generative AI tools for content generation and editing.

3.3.4 Training needs

In terms of women entrepreneurs' current experience of performing business tasks digitally, the survey results highlight both solid levels of proficiency and areas for improvement in respondents' self-assessment. Notably, a substantial percentage of respondents express advanced knowledge in carrying out tasks digitally, such as managing finances (29%) and vendor/customer relationships (27.5%), signalling a strong foundation in these areas. Conversely, the percentages of respondents claiming no knowledge of how to utilise digital tools are relatively high for tasks like managing staff-related processes (20.5%) and designing/creating products (18.4%). While the majority demonstrate a basic understanding in carrying most tasks digitally, the disparities between expert and advanced knowledge and no knowledge suggest a varied landscape of digital literacy. Overall, these findings demonstrate the need for targeted training initiatives to bridge knowledge gaps.

37.4%

37.4% of respondents reported having expert level or advanced knowledge in using digital tools to manage finances.



Overall, the results below show that the **strongest training needs are in the areas of website development, e-commerce, and marketing tools**; these are areas where women entrepreneurs have the greatest self-reported skills gaps.

20.5%

20.5% of respondents claimed having no knowledge at all of how to conduct staff related processes digitally.

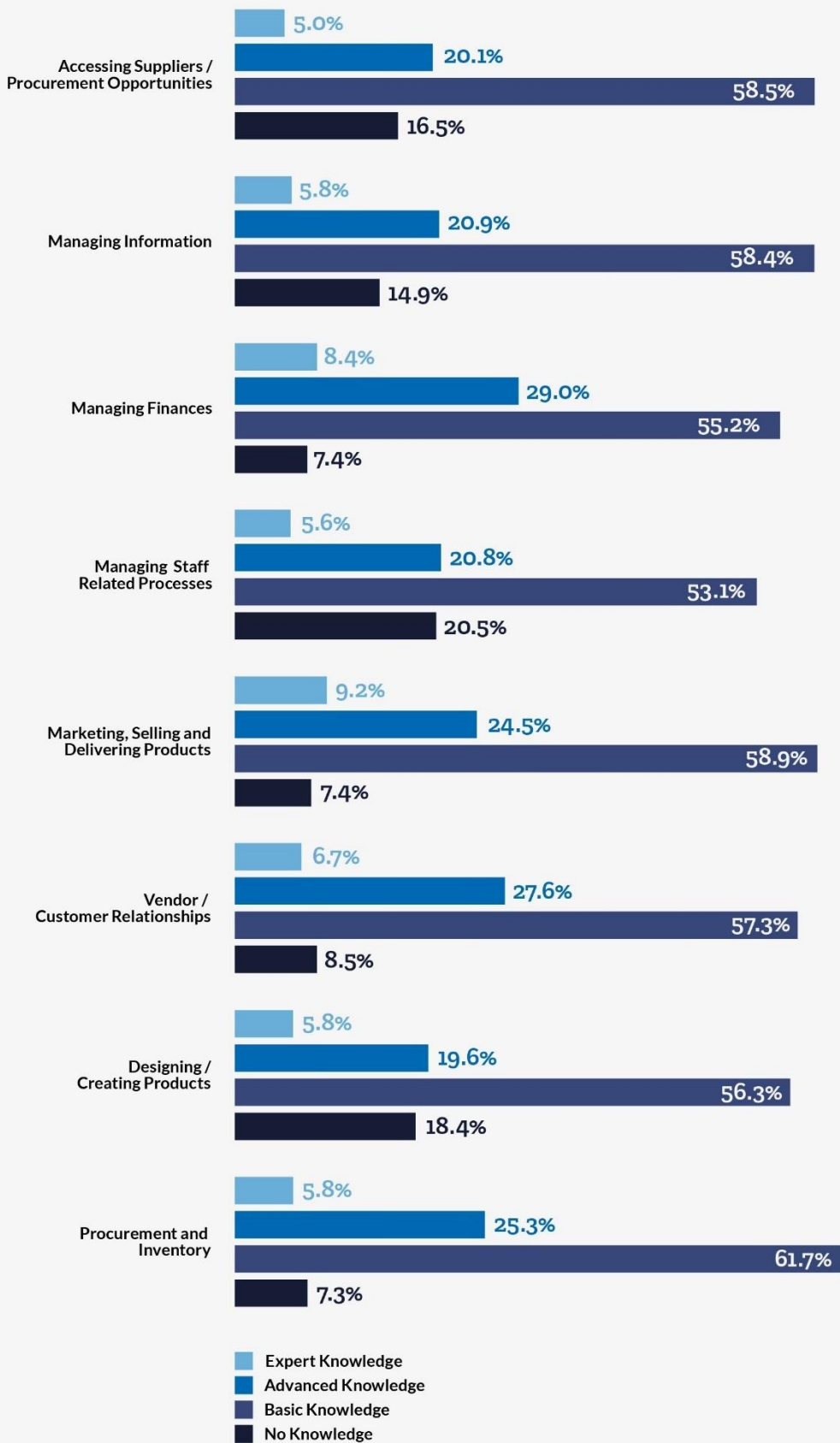
The primary **barrier preventing respondents from using generative AI tools**, such as ChatGPT or generative AI embedded within other digital tools, is the **need for more training**, as indicated by a substantial 65.5% of respondents. This suggests that while awareness might be an issue for some—with 20.9% indicating they have never heard about it—a significant portion are interested, but feel inadequately prepared to fully utilise generative AI tools or functionality in their businesses. This knowledge gap could be filled by the private sector, NGOs and government agencies seeking to remove the gender gap in AI access and to give women entrepreneurs a competitive edge in the marketplace.

20.9%

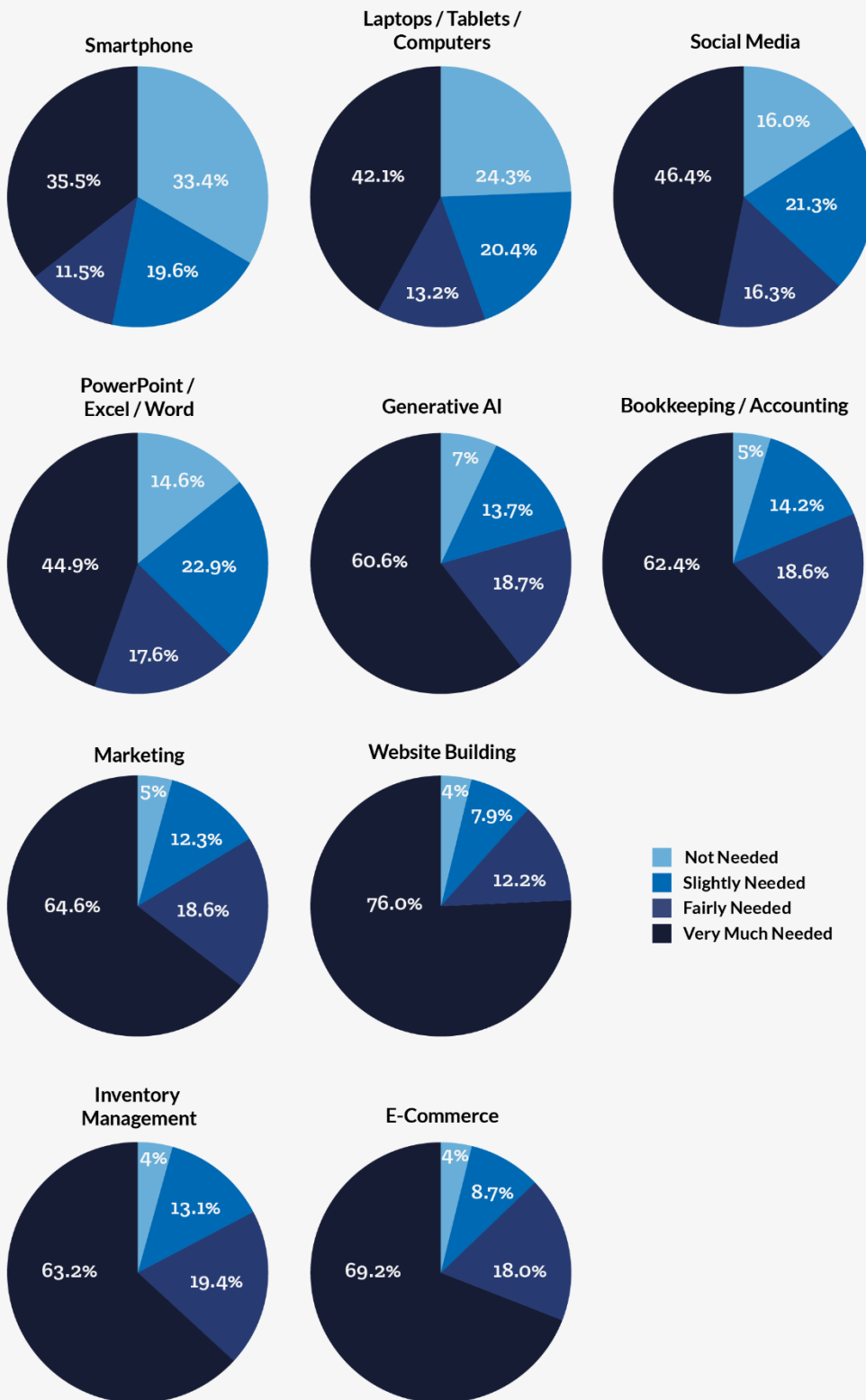
20.9% of respondents indicated that they had never heard about generative AI tools.

It is also worth noting that AI tools are already being integrated into existing everyday usage technologies such as Microsoft Office Suite products, email services, and much more. This means, for instance, that any future training programmes focused on the use of MailChimp for marketing could fulfil two major capacity-building needs of entrepreneurs simultaneously: Marketing and AI.

Level of Knowledge of Conducting Operations Digitally



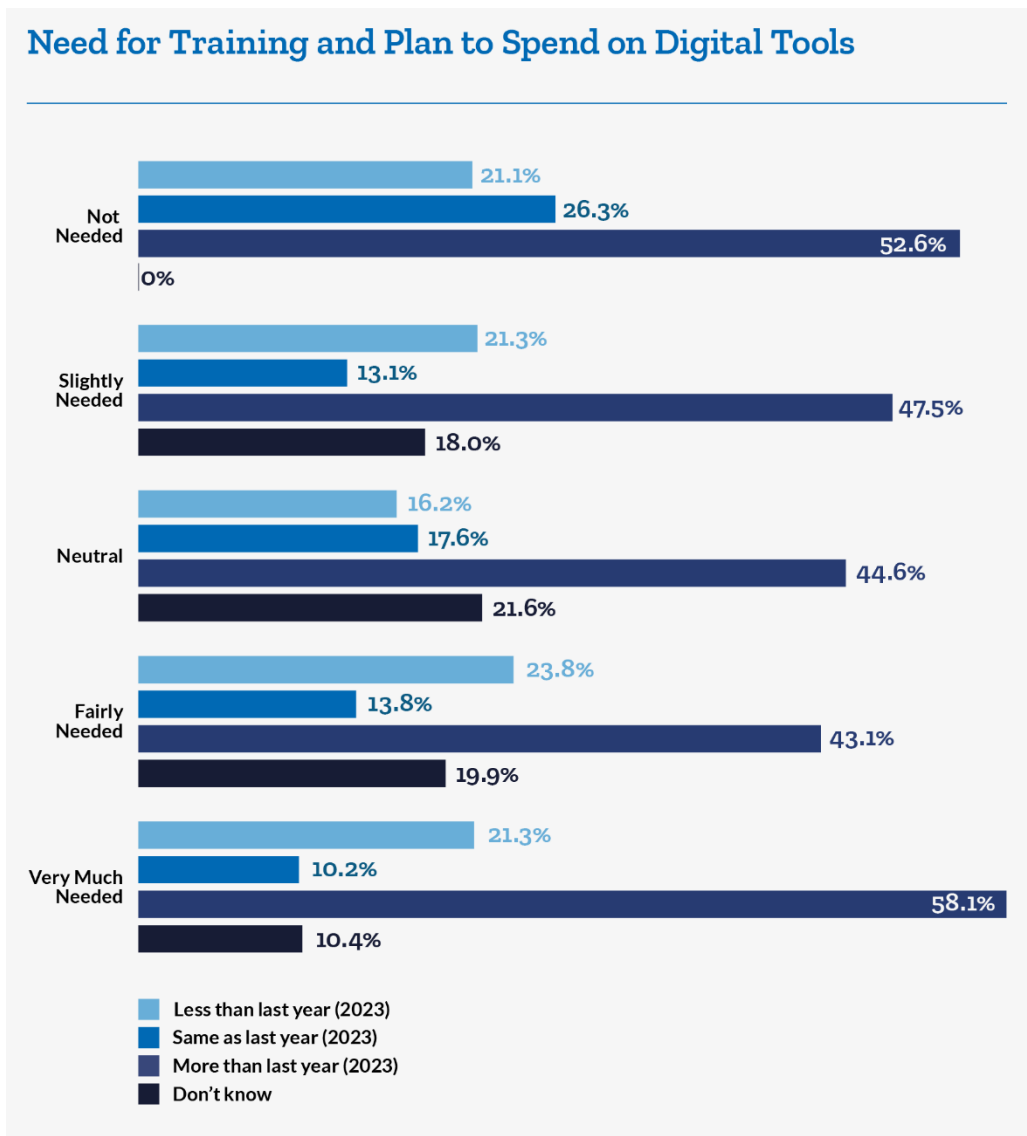
Need for Training





When asked about the need for training in the use of machine learning, ChatGPT, and other new AI technologies to improve business productivity, the majority of respondents, at 66.9%, expressed a **very high need for training**. This indicates a strong recognition of the potential benefits these advanced technologies can bring, with less than one in 10 respondents (8.7%) considering such training as not needed or only slightly needed.

Reinforcing the same idea, a majority (71.3%) expressed a very high level of interest in starting a new business venture or expanding their current business by offering AI-related tools and services. Like other businesses, for women entrepreneurs too, this represents a window of opportunity during which time AI-powered business applications would likely generate greater value for money due to 'first-mover' advantage.



The figure above, cross-tabulating data between respondents' perceived need for training in AI and their plans to invest in digital tools, reveals a

discernible trend. Notably, a majority of the individuals are planning to pay more for digital tools in the coming year irrespective of their need for training on AI tools. However, those who consider AI training to be “Very Much Needed” exhibit the highest proportion (58.1%) of those **intending to pay more** for digital tools. This could indicate that entrepreneurs who are planning to invest more in digital tools are also considering training in AI as being a higher priority as they seek to maximize their own return on investment.

58.1%

58.1% of respondents who consider AI training to be "very much needed" expressed an intention to pay more for digital tools in 2024, as compared to 2023.

3.4 Experiences of gender based discrimination and GBV in online spaces

Previous research from the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women has uncovered the high frequency of women entrepreneurs in LMICs experiencing gender stereotypes and being impacted by harmful social norms. Almost all (96%) of those surveyed by the Foundation in 2021 saying that they had directly experienced gender stereotypes in their lives, and 70% saying that gender stereotypes have negatively affected their work as an entrepreneur.

Gender stereotypes, harmful social norms and widespread sexism can contribute to a culture of acceptance and normalisation of GBV. It is widely recognised that GBV is a global epidemic and impacts women and girls online as well as offline. This report further examines the intersection of women’s experiences of gender discrimination, harassment and abuse in the online sphere with their business aspirations.

“Mostly not being heard because the voice of men is more present on platforms.”
A woman entrepreneur from Zambia

3.4.1 Gender discrimination

At 28.5%, just over a quarter of all women entrepreneurs reported facing gender discrimination during just the previous one year. In alignment with this, various studies have independently highlighted the prevalence of sexism and gender bias experienced by women entrepreneurs.^{25, 26}

“ I was explaining my business to someone and the guy said ‘As a mother I don't think you should focus on all of that, just focus on raising your child’.
A woman entrepreneur from Guyana **”**

Conversely, 55% stated that they did not experience such discrimination in the last year, while 16.8% expressed uncertainty about whether or not they faced it. This suggests a significant, but not universal, reporting prevalence of gender discrimination among women entrepreneurs.

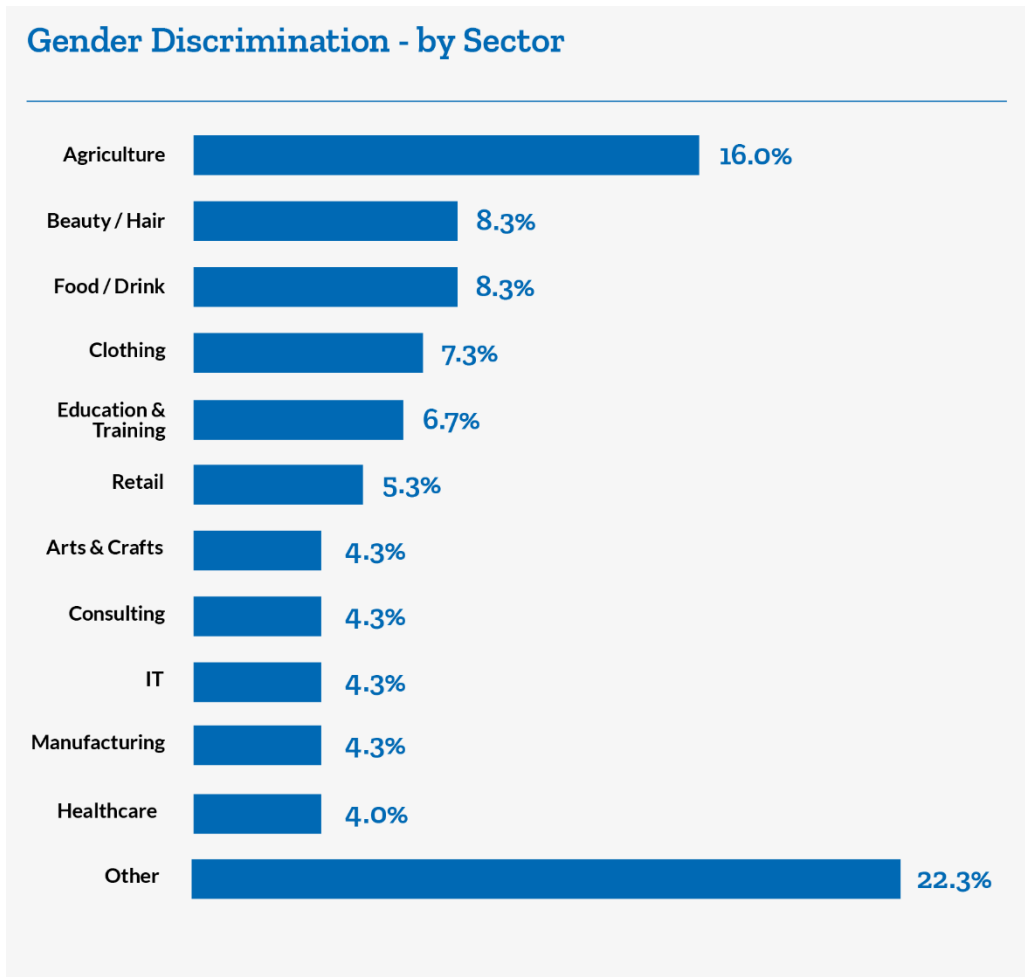
“ I am the only woman offering ICT short courses in my area but I have observed that many organisations came to corroborate with people in the ICT sector and only men were picked; I started wondering if it is because I am a woman.
A woman entrepreneur from Malawi **”**

²⁵ Simply Business (2022) 'Report into gender bias and inequality affecting women business owners'.

²⁶ Writers Block Live (2022) 'Women Entrepreneurs Statistics: Equality in 2022'.

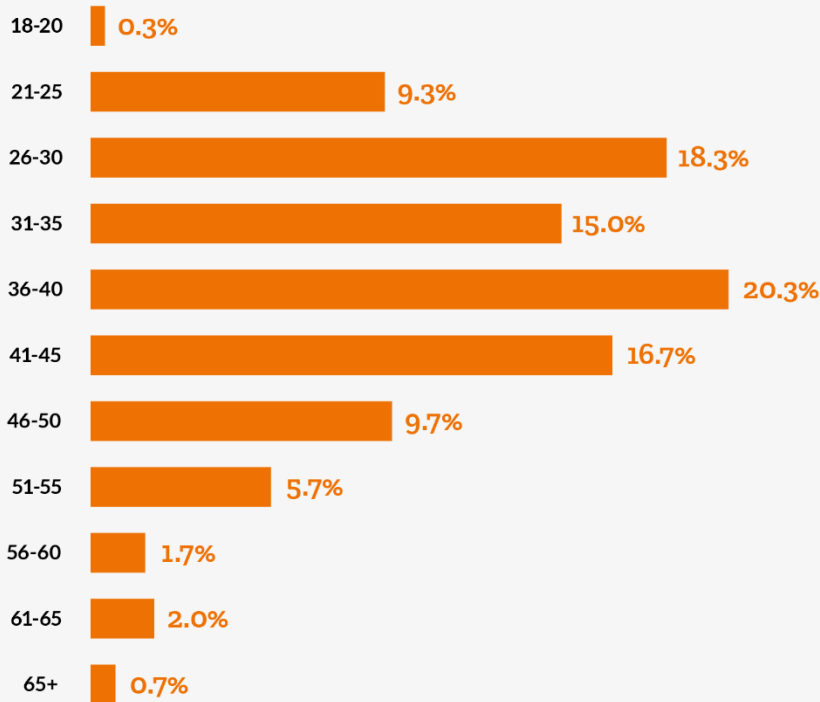


A deeper look into this finding, as shown below, reveals that gender discrimination is by far the most prevalent in the agriculture sector, followed by several other sectors requiring in-person customer, coworker and supplier interactions such as beauty/hair, food/drink, and clothing/tailoring.



As shown below, there was a higher prevalence of respondents reporting experiences of gender discrimination amongst the 26-45 age range.

Gender Discrimination - by Age



One in five respondents (20.5%) shared specific incidents regarding gender discrimination - both in person and digital. Most reported facing the public's scepticism about women's capabilities, struggles in male-dominated sectors, online harassment and stereotyping, and traditional gender roles and expectations for women.

“After posting my poultry rearing business on my WhatsApp status, my male friends were questioned, 'Who told you women can succeed in agriculture?'
A woman entrepreneur from Uganda”

To deal with doubts about her capabilities, for example, a woman entrepreneur from Tanzania said, “Sometimes I have to pose as an employee and insinuate that I have a male boss to try to convince my customers.” Similarly, a respondent based in Madagascar highlighted her society's negative attitude towards women entrepreneurs, due to traditional social norms about a woman's role in society: “On pense toujours que l'entrepreneuriat est spécifiquement pour les hommes, vu que dans la société les hommes prends toujours place en terme de leadership et

autorités surtout pour le cas des pays Africains.” (Translation: “We always think that entrepreneurship is specifically for men, given that in society men always take a place of leadership and authority, especially in the case of African countries”).

The same was reinforced when the research inquired about incidence of discrimination based on intersecting personal characteristics (which have been uncovered in the Foundation’s previous research). Age (24.7%), social class (16.9%), and ethnicity (12.7%) were the most commonly self-reported factors making women entrepreneurs additionally vulnerable to discrimination.

Studies have shown that the intersectionality of gender with age, ethnicity and other factors determines the extent to which women face discrimination.²⁷ For instance, women who are unable to afford private vehicles and thus are forced to use urban public transport services or walk in city streets are much more likely to face sexual harassment than those with the ability to afford private vehicles.²⁸

Yet, in some cases, the simple fact of being a woman entrepreneur appears to be reason enough to face discrimination, likely due to the prevalence of traditional gender norms.²⁹ For instance, an entrepreneur from Nigeria said, “People think we are incompetent because we are a female based seller based in the IT industry”, while another from Bangladesh said, “As a woman entrepreneur, people question why you are an entrepreneur, why you are not in a job. Also there is a trust issue. People just don’t trust women.”

“ A potential client felt that I was not bold enough to tackle a project and asked if we had a male on the team. ”
A woman entrepreneur from South Africa

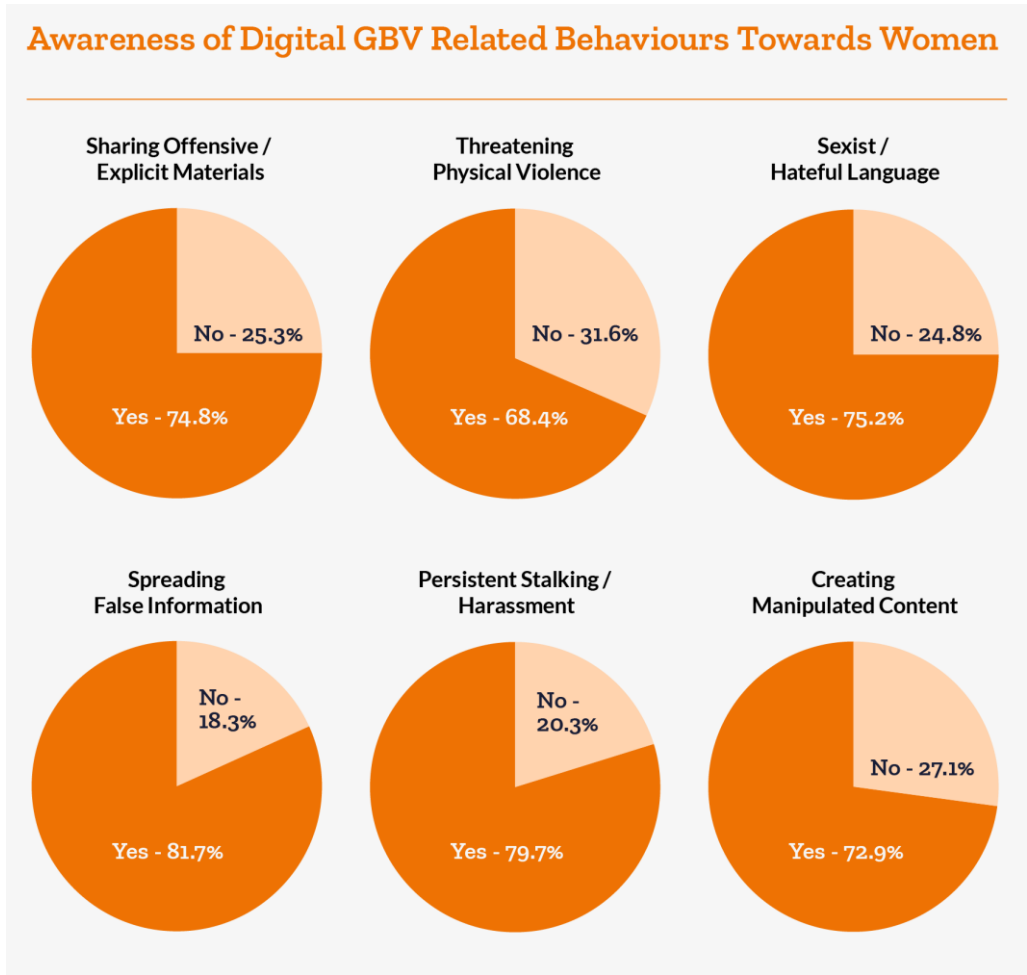
²⁷ Suzie Dunn (2020) ‘Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview’, Centre for International Governance Innovation: Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No 1.

²⁸ Yasemin Irvin-Erickson, A. A. Malik, F. Kamiran & M. Natarajan (2020) ‘Utility of ecological momentary assessments to collect data on fear of crime’, International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice.

²⁹ Peters et al. (2019) ‘Qualitative evidence on barriers to and facilitators of women’s participation in higher or growing productivity and male-dominated labour market sectors in low-and middle-income countries’.

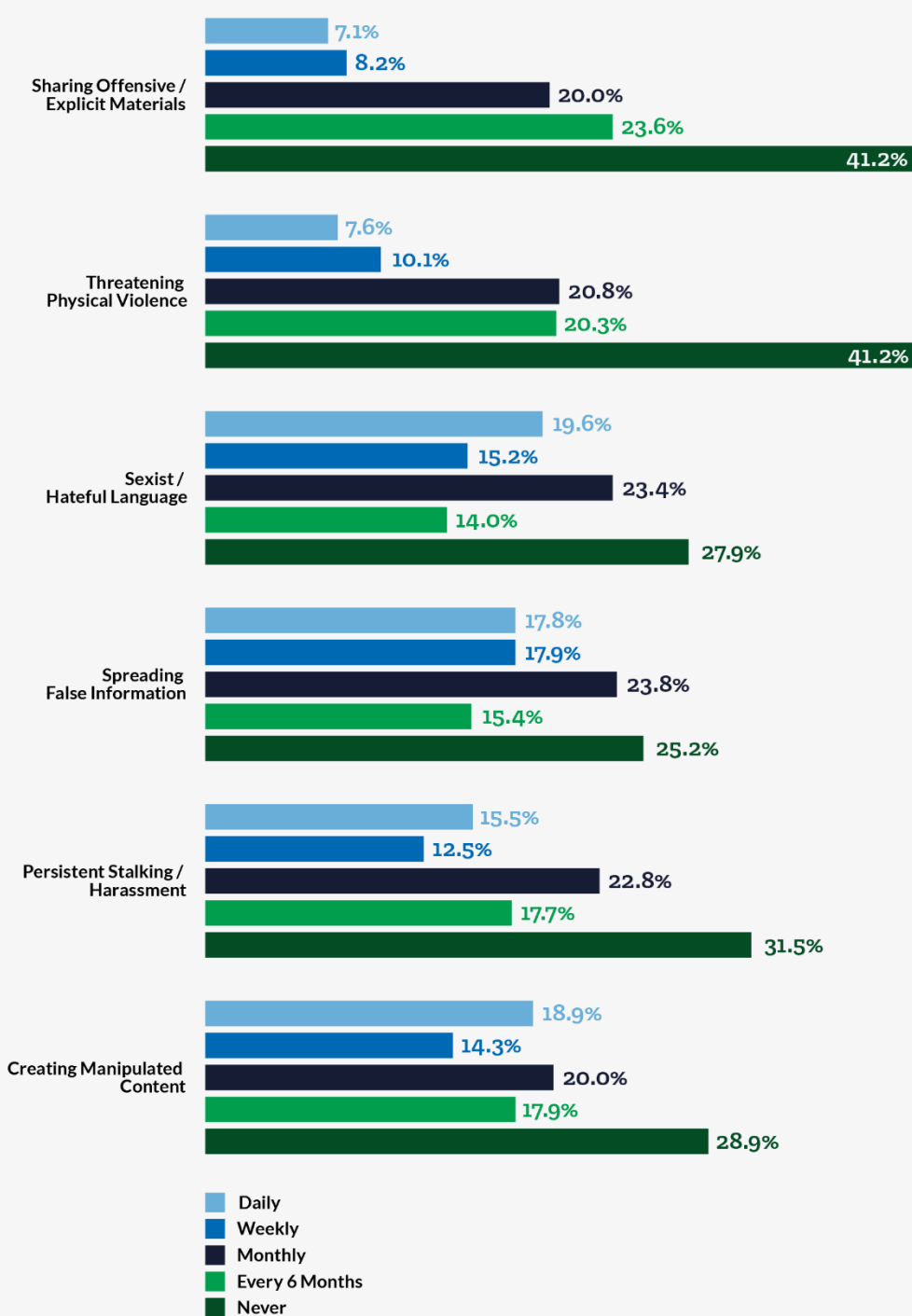
3.4.2 GBV in online spaces

When asked about **personally experiencing or witnessing GBV specifically in online spaces**, results show high awareness of online behaviours targeting women. Many women also report personally experiencing or witnessing such behaviours.



On average, 32.7% of respondents reported either never experiencing or witnessing online GBV. These measures of online GBV include sharing offensive materials, use of sexist/hateful language, experiencing/witnessing threatening physical violence, persistent stalking/harassment, and creating manipulated content. Over two-thirds (67.4%) of respondents reported personally witnessing or experiencing these behaviours over the last year, with occurrences happening six-monthly (18.2%), monthly (21.8%), weekly (13.0%), or daily (14.4%).

Frequency of Experiencing / Witnessing GBV Related Behaviours



Just over half (54.6%) reported that the mentioned behaviours had not affected their business success at all. A significant portion (21.7%) indicated a slight impact, while 14.4% reported a moderate effect. 7.3% noted a significant impact, and 2% stated that these incidents had drastically affected their business success. These results show that for a notable

proportion of women entrepreneurs experiencing or witnessing GBV online, there is some degree of negative consequences on their businesses.

For example, a women entrepreneur from Lesotho said, “Once it gets known that the woman is the buyer or seller, orders will be delayed and reviews will be negative”. This finding is consistent with a rich body of academic literature in the criminal justice field that finds that the fear of harassment and victimisation, even in online spaces, can severely hamper women’s ability to fully participate in economic activities.³⁰

“Buying and selling online is not a problem when one's gender is unknown. Once it gets known that the woman is the buyer or seller, orders will be delayed and reviews will be negative.”
A woman entrepreneur from Lesotho

Regarding the **various online platforms where incidents of GBV were experienced**, social networks, including Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, Snapchat etc. were the most frequently mentioned. 46.7% of respondents reporting experiences of GBV indicated that they had experienced it on these platforms. Photo and video sharing platforms, such as Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, TikTok, Douyin etc. were also notable, accounting for 18% of responses. Women reported fewer experiences of online GBV on messaging services, livestreaming sites and business networking platforms.

³⁰ Yasemin Irvin-Erickson, A. A. Malik, F. Kamiran & M. Natarajan (2020) ‘Utility of ecological momentary assessments to collect data on fear of crime’, International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice.

Conclusions

Around the world, the state of women's economic empowerment remains unacceptable. Globally women earn less than men. Women are far less likely to be able to set up and run businesses, with less access to crucial financing opportunities, training and tools. If they do 'start-up', their businesses are likely to remain small and informal and be less resilient to challenges in the macroeconomic environment. On top of this, women are hugely time poor as they take on the vast majority of unpaid care work, and they are extremely likely to experience GBV at some point in their lives.

“Opportunities were not readily available to me by virtue of my gender. This includes suppliers that often prefer to deal with my male business partner.”

A woman entrepreneur from Kenya

The ever changing digital landscape presents an opportunity to remove and reduce some of these barriers. However, it is yet to be seen whether and how much the advent of new technologies for conducting business will ultimately impact the economic gender gap. Like all disruptive technologies that have come before—electricity, computers and the internet—new technologies such as social media platforms, digital tools and AI are transforming small businesses throughout the world. This new development is further accelerating an ongoing digital transformation for small businesses where many women entrepreneurs are benefiting immensely from the availability of digital sales and operations platforms.

Women entrepreneurs in LMICs undertake much greater unpaid care work than their male counterparts due to traditional social norms.³¹ They are disproportionately more likely to care for children and the elderly, as well as taking on the majority of domestic responsibilities. The availability of these new digital tools therefore presents a convenient business growth opportunity in that women can use them at any place and time whilst

³¹ Peters et al. (2019) 'Qualitative evidence on barriers to and facilitators of women's participation in higher or growing productivity and male-dominated labour market sectors in low-and middle-income countries'.

zigzag

juggling other priorities. However, this study has revealed that even among women entrepreneurs enjoying relatively high socioeconomic status, there are still glaring gaps in their ability to make full use of available business growth opportunities provided by new technologies. Without adequate steps taken today to narrow these gaps, they will not only persist but stand to widen as new technologies emerge – so too widening the gender gap in entrepreneurship and in economic participation as a whole.

“As a law firm we have got about three more clients on retainer and we have increased our use of technology to schedule our meetings as well as adapting to the use of technology offered by the Judiciary and other offices like the Company Registry.”

A woman entrepreneur from Uganda

As work to empower women entrepreneurs across LMICs to narrow the entrepreneurship gap and promote economic gender equality continues, the advent of new technologies has brought fresh opportunities and challenges. As the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, **technology-enabled sectors have propelled economic growth** in many advanced economies. While AI-enabled tools have been impacting businesses for years, the public release of ChatGPT and generative AI is already disrupting industries, creating both new opportunities for AI-enabled revenue sources, and eliminating others. Optimists have posited that AI-enabled tools can become a “superpower for entrepreneurs”³² and represent “the dawn of a new era”³³ that will transform the internet age in consequential ways. But for women entrepreneurs in LMICs to benefit from these disruptive forces, they also have to continue to overcome the traditional barriers they face in virtual and physical spaces, including the threat and experiences of GBV.

³² Maharajh Nikola (2023) 'The Best Superpower for Entrepreneurs to Have in 2024', Medium.

³³ Brookings (2018) 'The dawn of a new era: Opportunities and challenges of artificial intelligence'.



Recommendations

Actions for Change

Based on analysis of the survey findings from a vast array of women entrepreneurs around the world, this section offers a set of actions that would minimise the challenges they face and enhance their ability to make full use of available business opportunities. The underlying analysis is also supported by reviews of existing policies and programmes, literature on women-owned businesses, and internal consultations based on the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women's substantial experience of working directly with women entrepreneurs across LMICs since 2008. We urge readers to consider both our high-level recommendations, and specific actions for urgent change.

Key calls to action

- **Design and implement gender-specific, woman-centred programmes to support women entrepreneurs' use of digital tools and technologies, including AI-enabled tools and all with gender-neutral algorithms.** Reducing the gender gap in access to and use of these vital tools requires targeted training and access initiatives to build women's skills and confidence in the digital sphere. Training should also include soft skills, technical skills, and how to navigate local business regulatory environments.



76%

76% of respondents highlighted a strong demand for training in the field of website development.


- **Call out and combat harmful gender stereotypes and gender based discrimination that impact on women entrepreneurs' ability to start, sustain and grow their businesses.** All stakeholders have a role to play in raising awareness of the impacts of harmful stereotypes on

women's ability to realise their rights, abilities and opportunities. Regulatory, civil and private sectors—particularly the technology industry, which is designing and managing online tools—should ensure and monitor women's ability to access online business spaces safely.

“Despite my background in the sciences, which is the backbone of my start-up, there have been times when people have not trusted me with projects solely because I am a female scientist.”

A woman entrepreneur from India

- **Bolster private businesses' awareness of, and ability to meet, women entrepreneurs' growing need and propensity to spend on technology-enabled business services.** The average monthly spending on these tools indicates that serving women entrepreneurs' needs is already a multi-billion-dollar industry; women are planning to expand this spending by an average of 37.2% during 2024. Working through business associations in LMICs, global service providers should be educated on local needs. This could lead to more gender-specific and tailored product designs and pricing, such as mobile-first technologies to ease access to digital business tools.
- **Design and deliver gender-specific women-centred programmes to increase the adoption of digital financial services among women entrepreneurs.** Investments from private financial institutions, the fintech industry and the public sector can help overcome the gap between the relatively high degree of online banking usage and relatively low uptake of digital payment systems among this cohort of women entrepreneurs. These new services could be used to meet the investment needs of small businesses, with specific product offerings for women-owned businesses.
- **Offer new avenues for women entrepreneurs to expand and solidify business networks across various sectors, geographies and business tool applications.** This was a major driver of success for women during 2023. Fresh investments to create new or grow access to existing women entrepreneurs' networks, associations, or other forms of interest groups could further bolster their ability to enhance their businesses with professional and personal support, access to customers and markets, and sharing of opportunities.

- 
- **Make significant investments in bolstering the physical public infrastructure necessary for improved coverage, reliability and speed of broadband services.** This is particularly true for remote areas in LMICs, but could also apply to cities, towns and villages, where service standards are suboptimal.


“Upgrading the devices is very costly and so is trying to set up a technologically linked office.”
A woman entrepreneur from Pakistan

Critical actions for change

To accomplish these recommended outcomes, we call upon several key stakeholder groups to undertake specific actions as follows.

Governments and public decision makers

- **Introduce training programmes for women entrepreneurs, like those provided by the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women,** supporting participants to boost their digital literacy, formalise their businesses, access finance and grow their networks, as well as providing technology and digital tools skills development and subsidies, including around generative AI.
- **Provide tailored support to encourage formalisation of women-owned businesses,** which will support their investment potential and would enable them to become eligible for government schemes, such as subsidised financial credit, while allowing them to enter the formal banking sector. This could include virtual and in-person business registration workshops, training such as provided by the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, and new online platforms such as business registration promoted through chambers of commerce and nonprofits working within networks of women entrepreneurs across LMICs.
- **Explore methods to regulate user behaviours on various online platforms,** including social media channels, used for business activities in order to provide protections for women entrepreneurs from discrimination, harassment and abuse. This could be done in partnership with global efforts, led by multilateral organisations, to establish and implement global best practices in digital safety .

- 
- **Assess and fill digital infrastructure gaps** to lower costs and improve the quality and reliability of mobile and fibre-optic internet services, including through 4G and 5G connectivity, particularly in unconnected or poorly connected regions.

Multilateral organisations

- **Provide technical assistance to government agencies in LMICs** seeking to develop new capacity-building programmes for enhancing women entrepreneurs' ability to utilise new technology. Supplement this with cross-country regional and international learning and exchange platforms for women's entrepreneurship development, in order to provide practical support and networking opportunities related to technology enabled business services.
- **Introduce grants or low interest rate loans for women entrepreneurs requiring hardware** such as laptops or other technology equipment or digital tools for business growth or day-to-day operations.
- **Bolster women entrepreneurs' networks and communities of practice** at the local, regional or global levels, with a focus on digital skills and new and emerging technologies for entrepreneurship.

“Lack of a laptop which would have gone a long way to ensure my optimal productivity.”
A woman entrepreneur from Nigeria

Private sector

- **Invest in women's entrepreneurship and create a more level playing field for women business owners** by partnering with government agencies, NGOs and nonprofit organisations, and multilateral organisations in order to provide training and support programmes and services to women entrepreneurs. These should encompass skills and knowledge building and network development—as do the programmes offered by the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women—that enable women entrepreneurs to strengthen and formalise their businesses, access finance, and make full use of new technologies.
- Investors with experience in developing startup ecosystems in high income countries should consider **making investments into women-owned businesses in LMICs** where there is both a clear economic imperative to do so and an opportunity to level the playing field for women entrepreneurs.



- Technology companies and digital service providers should strive to **develop a more nuanced understanding of local markets in LMICs in terms of women entrepreneurs' needs and spending patterns**. This could enable them to access new markets where low margins could be compensated by high volumes of clients across a wide spectrum of sectors, whilst supporting efforts to reduce the gender gap in access to technology.
- **Forge partnerships, potentially supported by government agencies and NGOs, between local women entrepreneurs' networks in LMICs and values-driven investors around the world**. These new schemes should be designed to target women-owned businesses, including by forging new partnerships between the global ethical investment communities and entrepreneurship networks in LMICs.

NGOs and nonprofit organisations - local and global

- Using their regional or international networks, NGOs and nonprofit organisations with a focus on skills development and gender should **bring world class training programmes to women entrepreneurs in LMICs, such as those offered by the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women**. Courses could focus on both soft and hard skills, and should ideally be delivered in close partnership with local women's business associations or government agencies responsible for small business development. This would ensure knowledge transfer and institution building, supporting local stakeholders to conduct their own training programmes in alignment with their own local environments.
- **Forge implementation partnerships with government agencies, private companies and multilateral organisations** that typically have large-scale resources but limited deployment capacity on the ground due to the lack of local networks and knowhow. These partnerships would support the design of new services and the scaling of tried and tested services for women entrepreneurs.

Avenues for future research

This research has generated **new questions** about the efficacy and salience of technology-enabled tools in smaller businesses, including the advent of generative AI, the equality of opportunity, infrastructural challenges, and ways of addressing unequal resourcing amongst the wider community of women entrepreneurs. We therefore recommend that future research be undertaken.

- Conduct follow-up studies on the **evolution and application of new generative AI tools** with strong business applications to assess the dynamics of the uptake of these tools by women entrepreneurs, both by geographies and sectors.



- Explore findings about women entrepreneurs' aspirations, challenges and uses of digital services and tools in terms of **various explanatory factors** such as income levels, sizes of businesses, years of experience, sectors and regions. It would also be useful to link these with opportunities for economic growth from the application of digital tools.
- Undertake new and comprehensive research into the specific ways in which women entrepreneurs across various business sectors, markets, and geographies are able to **utilise social media platforms** to achieve business objectives.