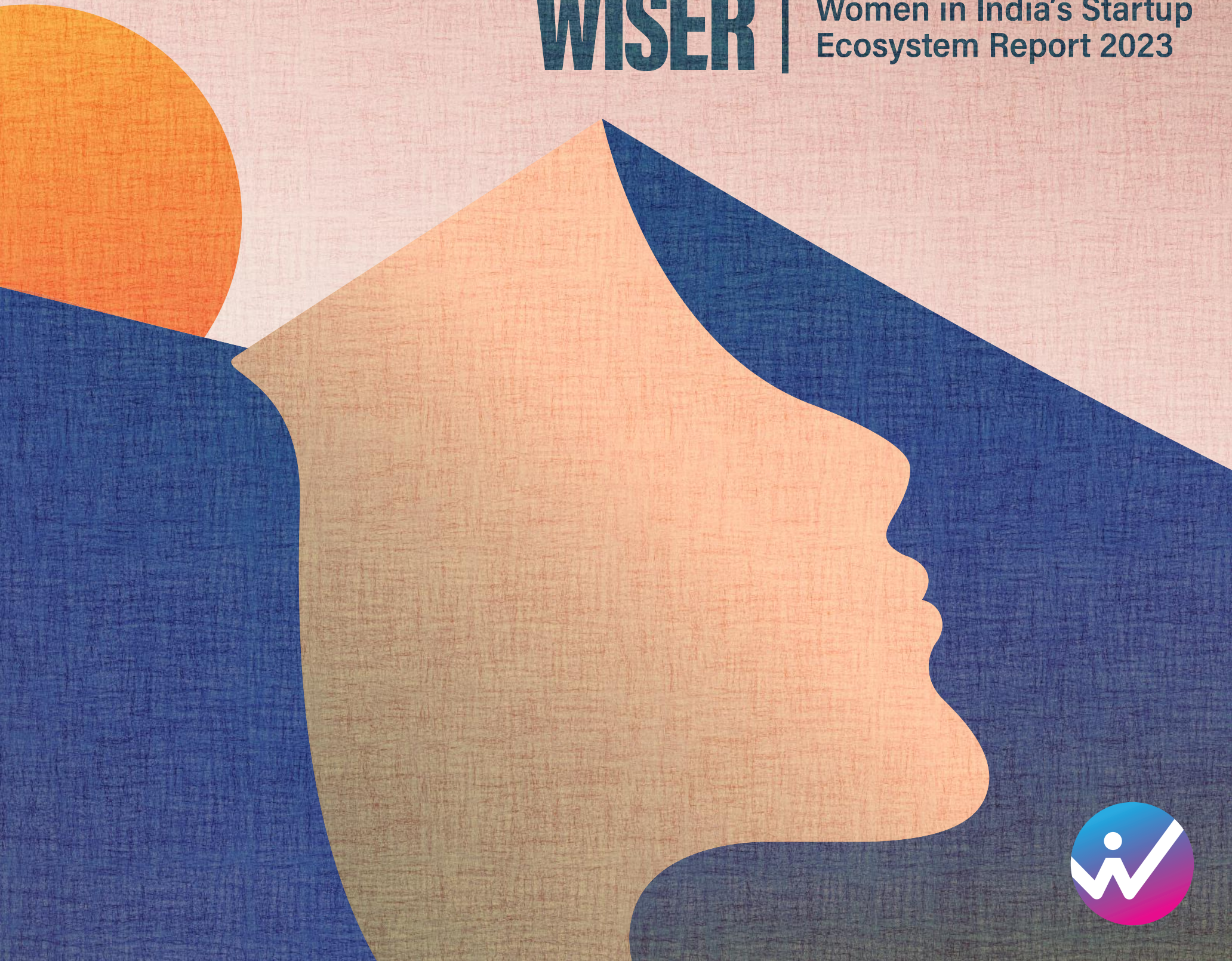# WISER | Women in India's Startup Ecosystem Report 2023

Women in India's Startup Ecosystem Report

India's first and largest collaborative report on women in startups

On the 16th of January 2023, the same day as National Startup Day, we initiated the Women in India's Startup Ecosystem Report (WISER) with a resolute belief in the startup ecosystem's potential to catalyse gender equity in India.

Each of our 200+ participating startups met us with the conviction that they can, and must, do better for India's women. They shared data on successful practices, acknowledged their failures and agreed that there's still a lot that needs to be done. But most of all, they met us with the commitment to leverage WISER's insights in building momentum for the path ahead.

WISER has truly been an effort *by* and *for* India's startup ecosystem to move the needle on gender equity.

A deep sense of gratitude for all the startups who participated in WISER 2023 – thank you for being co-founders of social change!

List of Participating Startups*

A2P Energy	Digiaccel learning	Indiefolio	Octopolis	Swiggy
AASVA Technologies India Private Limited	DigiSec360	inFeedo	OkayGo	Techplus Media Pvt. Ltd.
Ambee	Doubtnut	Instasolv	Orena Solutions Pvt.. Ltd.	The Moms Co
Anveshan	Ecowork	Intentwise	PhonePe	Thrillophillia
APChemi Pvt. Ltd.	FlexiBees	Josh Talks	PickMyAd	Tjori
ARTech Unlimited	Frontier Markets	JumpingMinds.ai	PinkBlue Supply Solutions Pvt. Ltd.	TurboHire
Arthan	FS Life previously FableStreet	Kalvium	Plum	Urban Company
Aurum Consumer Services Private Limited	Genex Space	Karma center for Counselling and Wellbeing	Postoast	Vanity Wagon
Avishkaar	Glance	KarmaLife	Pristyn care	VerSe Innovation
Bare Craft Consulting	Glee Natural Toys	Karya	ProductDev Edge Private Limited	Vidyakul
Believe Pte. Ltd.	Goodlifes E-commerce Solutions Pvt. Ltd.	Kheyti	progalaxy	Vygr Media Private Limited
Betterhalf	Greedygame	Klenty	Qualicentric	Whatfix
Beyond Exams	Happimynd	Kutuki	Quant Samurai	Wysa
Blue Ribbon Academy	Haqdarshak	Kwikpic	Reearth Tech Pvt. Ltd.	Yourdost
Cashify	Heads Up For Tails	LabourNet Services India Private Limited	Ria	Ytalks
CONCAT Business Consulting Pvt Ltd	Health Basix	Lemonade	S4S Technologies	Zenoti
ConveGenius	Hungerbox	Manah wellness	Saathealth	Zest Money
Culsac	IDreamCareer	Meesho	Saathi Pads	Zipgigz
Dial4trade Technologies Pvt. Ltd.	iKure Techsoft Pvt. Ltd.	Menstrupedia	Siddhan Intelligence Private Limited	Zomato Limited
	Inc42	Mesh	Supertails	Zouk

* Not a complete list

Women in India's Startup Ecosystem Report

Foreword

Abhiraj Singh Bhal – Co-founder, Urban Company

"WISER serves as a valuable primer for understanding just how crucial it is for the startup world to embrace and empower more women in their workforce. It provides insights and practical wisdom on how startups can nurture the careers of their women employees. By shedding light on the current landscape, WISER can act as a catalyst for change, paving the way towards a more diverse and supportive ecosystem.

Sustainable, high-quality growth is achievable when it's inclusive and benefits everyone. In this context, WISER represents an important step toward ensuring that women get equal opportunities to rise and excel within India's rapidly growing startup ecosystem.

Gayatri Yadav – CMO, Peak XV Partners

"What if startups could lead the way in achieving gender equality at the workplace within the next decade, making the Indian startup ecosystem a global benchmark?

Data from the WISER 2023 study reveals both opportunities and challenges in turning this into a reality:

— Women comprise 35% of the startup workforce, compared to 19% in corporates.
— 18% of startup CEOs/founders are women, while only 5% hold these positions in corporates.
— However, the gender gap at leadership positions widens after the 10-year mark, with just 24% of women reaching CXO/SVP levels, compared to 40% of men.

Historically, the focus has been on achieving equality at the entry-level, but it's imperative to address recruitment, retention, and advancement to bridge this gap. I firmly believe that the Indian startup ecosystem possesses the potential to lead this transformative journey.

Mohit Bhatnagar – MD, Peak XV Partners

"Every founder and investor has the power to ignite the transformation towards inclusivity by first looking within and ensuring that their own organizations reflect the change they aspire to witness. I deeply believe that only by sharing our own vulnerabilities can we be more purposeful about doing better by women in the ecosystem.

We hope that WISER can inspire the venture capital and startup ecosystems to be more authentic, more cognizant, and equipped to act. Currently, 18% of Founders/CEOs and 21% of senior leaders across India's startups are women. My personal hope is that this figure stands at a remarkable 50% by 2030.

Suman Gopalan – Ex-CHRO, Freshworks & Advisory Council Chair, ACT For Women

"As an HR practitioner with over 25 years of experience, I've witnessed the recurring themes of "talent shortage" and "the war for talent" being posed as potential challenges for businesses. It's perplexing, considering our position as one of the world's most populous and reasonably well-educated nations. To top it off, there's the stark reality of our ranking among the lowest in Female Labor Force Participation.

However, this is our moment to transform the narrative and harness the potential of our demographic to our advantage! It's exciting to see the startup ecosystem taking the lead in driving this change, paving the way for a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

I am delighted to see WISER spotlighting some of the best practices and areas that require further improvement, and, most importantly, empowering us to usher in this remarkable shift!

Vivek Pandit – Senior Partner, McKinsey & Co

"The Indian startup ecosystem is faced with a tremendous opportunity – to play an instrumental role in making gender equity a priority and consequently a reality. Startups offer a strong proposition for India's most talented women, whose expectations are no different than men. As they scale, leadership roles and need for talent expand, pulling all talent up more rapidly, supporting accelerated career tracks and learning.

Further, 18% of startups and unicorns are women founded/co-founded, where we see more women in senior roles and more in roles of influence. There is also clear evidence that culture plays an outsized role, enabling gender equity policies and women to thrive. We hope this report serves as a catalyst to all founders, investors, and senior leaders to ACT!

Executive summary

India's startup ecosystem has been pivotal in unleashing economic growth and catalyzing entrepreneurial innovation. As a leading and high growth employer, the industry attracts a large and diverse pool of talent, positioning it uniquely to lead the way toward gender equity in the private sector.

Our findings, collected from over 200 Indian startups, demonstrate their potential to move the needle on gender diversity by fostering inclusion as a part of their cultural DNA. WISER shows that startups can offer women a more gender equitable environment, by way of faster career progression, ability to occupy more roles of influence, and greater autonomy and flexibility, which enables female employees to meet personal and professional goals at different career stages. Women-led startups perform even better on gender equality. Startups that have at least one female founder have 2.5x more women in senior roles as compared to male-founded startups at near gender parity. A remarkable observation has been that, contrary to popular perception, women's motivations to join startups are no different from men, with both preferring accelerated learning & advancement, fast pace of work, financial autonomy and innovation.

However, significant work lies ahead and gender equity remains an unfinished business even in the startup world. While there are more women in senior roles, tenure and seniority for women does not keep pace in comparison to men. Our analysis reveals that a decade into their careers, 8 out of 10 men in startups occupy Director-level positions or higher, compared to only 5 in 10 women. To address such challenges, startups can begin with aligning their culture to meet specific and transparent gender goals. From leaders and managers to HR professionals and employees themselves, leading startups demonstrate how everyone contributes to ensuring women thrive at the workplace.

We believe that the startup ecosystem can build on their early headstart. With careful introspection among founders that helps support timely and targeted action, they can pave a path to creating two million new jobs for women by 2030.
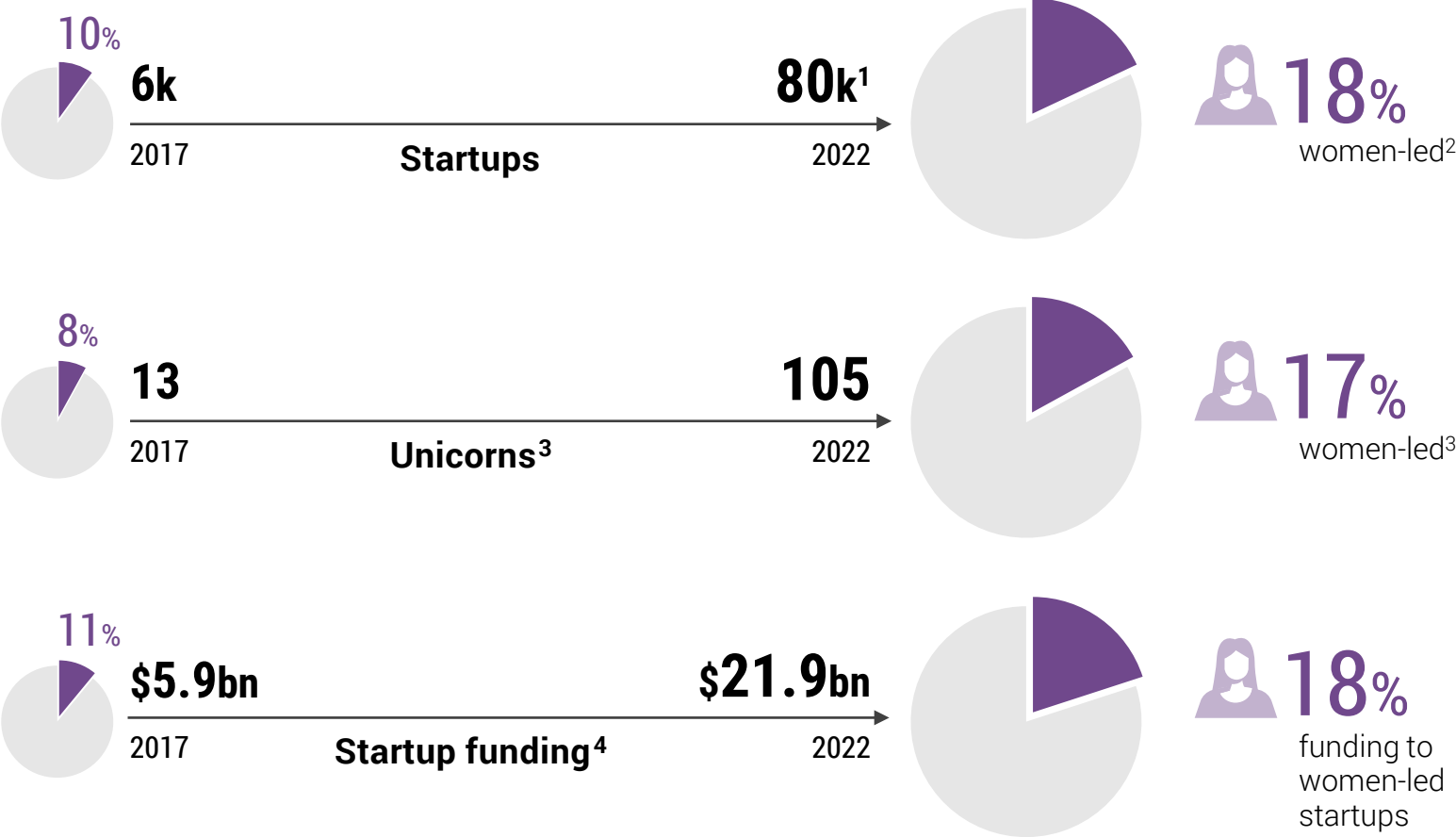
Whether you're a startup founder, an HR lead or an employee, YOU can lead the change on enabling your workplace for women. Reach out to us on actforwomen@actgrants.in to join our growing collective of startups championing gender-equal workplaces.

1

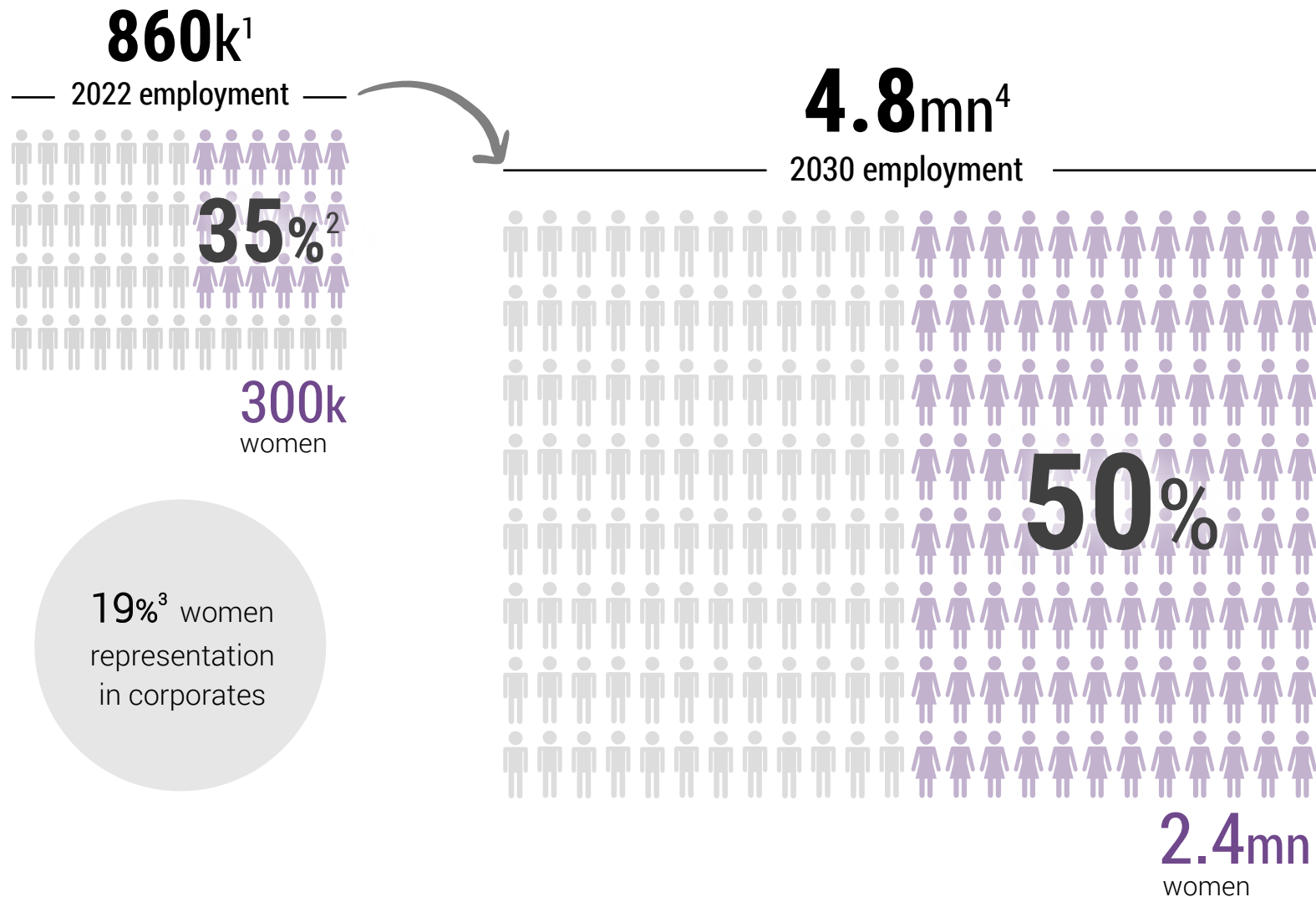# Startups can pave a new path to gender equity

Startups are fueling India's growth with women-led businesses playing increasingly important roles

10% | **6k** | **80k**[1] | 18% women-led[2]
2017 | **Startups** | 2022

8% | **13** | **105** | 17% women-led[3]
2017 | **Unicorns**[3] | 2022

11% | **$5.9**bn | **$21.9**bn | 18% funding to women-led startups
2017 | **Startup funding**[4] | 2022

Source:

1. DPIIT number of recognized startups, 2022

2. NASSCOM Rising Above Uncertainty Report

3. Cumulative unicorn count, press search and Inc 42 *'The State of Indian Startup Ecosystem Report'*, 2022

4. McKinsey analysis; Pitchbook data; based on VC funding for Indian startups

Startups could build on early success to create over 2mn new jobs for women by 2030

860k[1]
— 2022 employment —

35%[2]

300k
women

19%[3] women representation in corporates

4.8mn[4]
— 2030 employment —

50%

2.4mn
women

Source:

1. DPIIT   2. WISER survey   3. PLFS 2021–22   4. ACT For Women's estimation basis Strideone report

Note: Corporates defined as proprietorship and partnership firms and public and private limited companies with over 20 employees

2

Startups attract some of the most talented women

Desire for unhindered personal and professional growth fuels the startup talent engine

Faster progression

It takes **half** the time to become a leader in a startup as it does in a corporate

> Promotions come faster as you have full accountability and there's no red tape
> — Startup woman employee

Higher autonomy

Twice as many employees report a sense of autonomy in startups as do those in large corporates

> We encourage employees to run entire business units, solve problems and manage teams on their own
> — Founder of services platform

Merit based

The average age of startup employees is **half** of their corporate equivalents; potential is valued over work experience

> Startups don't look at age and past experience as a deciding factor before giving someone responsibility
> — Startup woman employee
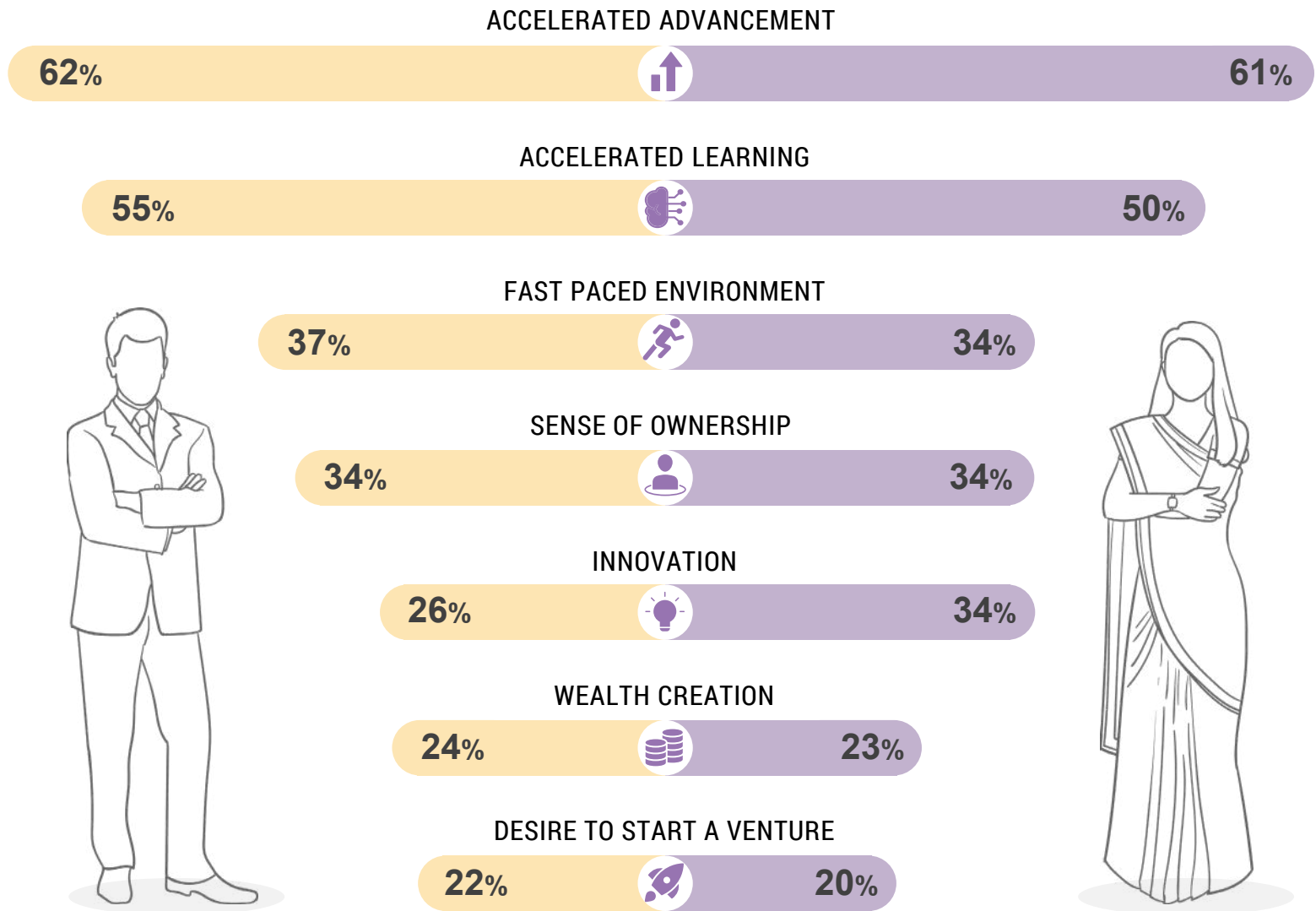
Financial independence

Wealth creation drives **one of four** employees to join startups

> We pay people equally based on experience and skill
> — Founder of F&B business

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

Women's motivation to join startups is no different from men

ACCELERATED ADVANCEMENT

62% — 61%

ACCELERATED LEARNING

55% — 50%

FAST PACED ENVIRONMENT

37% — 34%

SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

34% — 34%

INNOVATION

26% — 34%

WEALTH CREATION

24% — 23%

DESIRE TO START A VENTURE

22% — 20%

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

Startups enable women to realize their personal and professional goals at multiple career stages

Entering
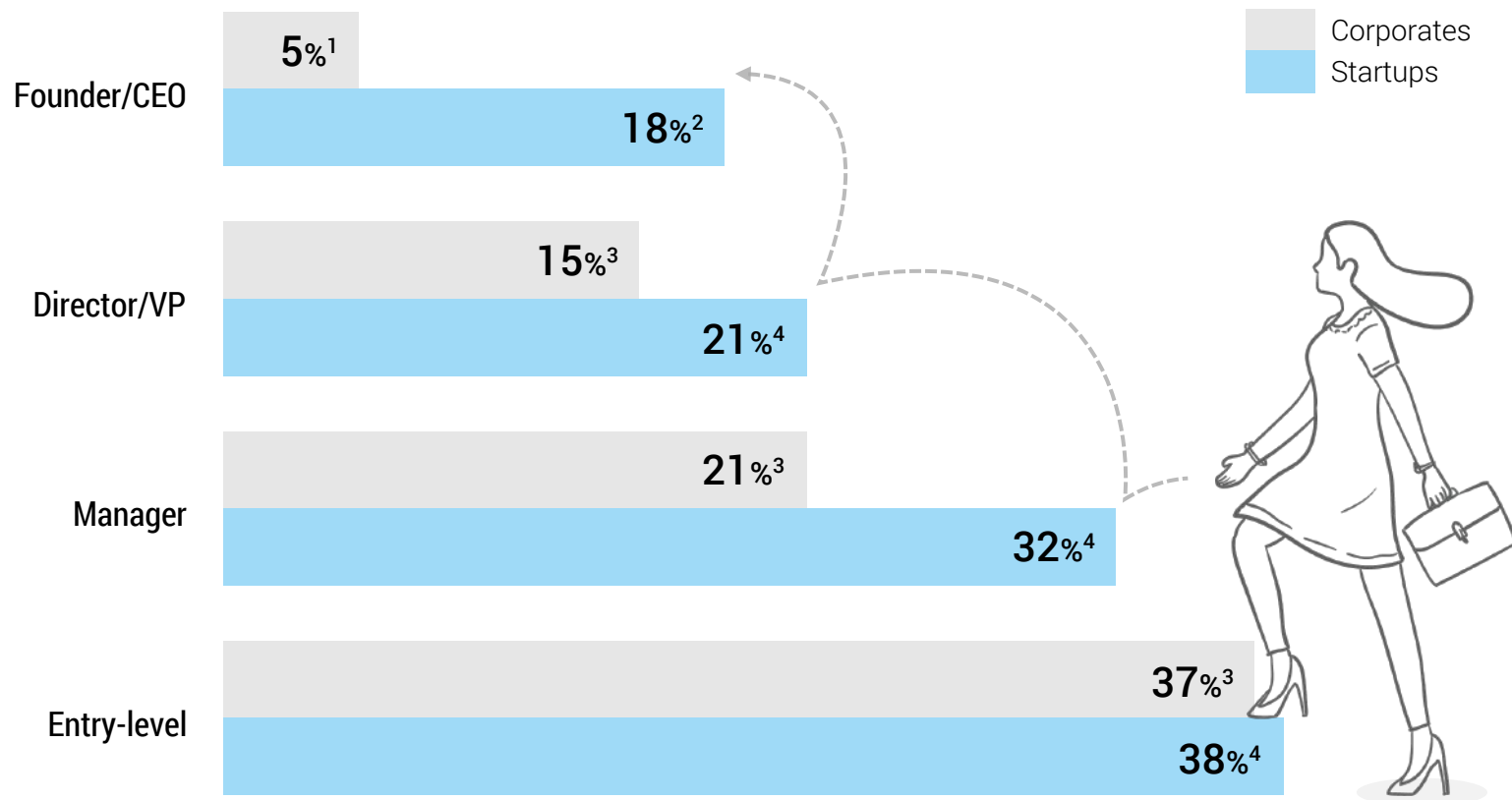### (<5 years)

More early-career women in startups join for **financial independence** (24%) than men (14%)

Establishing
(5-10 years)

As they progress, women are drawn towards **innovation** – they desire to be a part of business critical teams. This is twice as important for women in their 30s (40%) as in their 20s (20%)

Enhancing
(10+ years)

Experienced women in startups want to **advance** their careers and **break the glass ceiling**; this has been challenging in corporates. It's emerged as the single most important factor for 72% of them

Source: WISER survey

3
Gender equity in startups is unfinished business

There are more women in senior roles at startups

Corporates
Startups

Founder/CEO
Corporates: 5%[1]
Startups: 18%[2]

Director/VP
Corporates: 15%[3]
Startups: 21%[4]

Manager
Corporates: 21%[3]
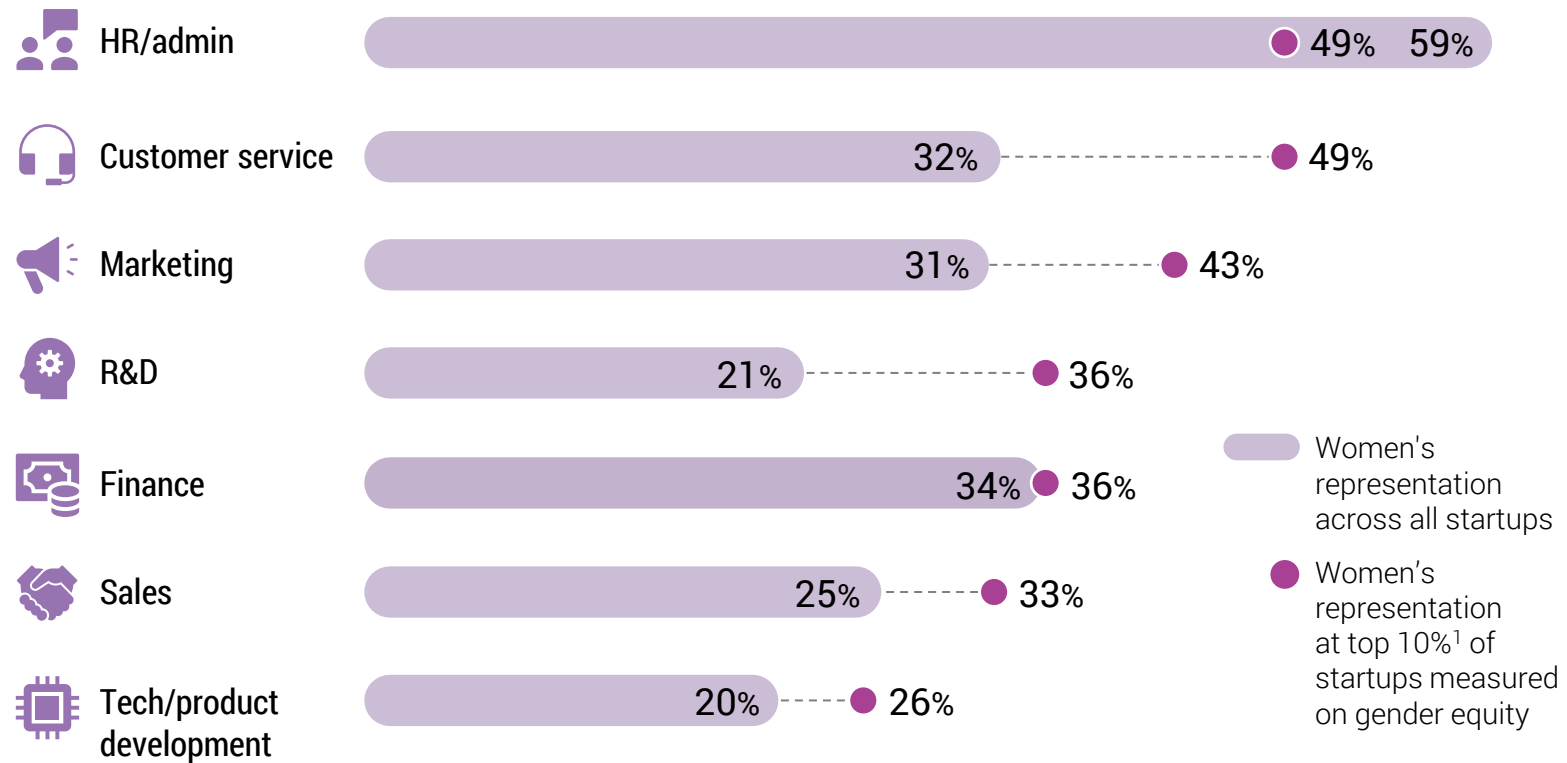Startups: 32%[4]

Entry-level
Corporates: 37%[3]
Startups: 38%[4]

Source:

1. Women CEO/MDs across NSE publicly listed organizations
2. NASSCOM Rising Above Uncertainty Report
3. Women's representation across top 100 corporates, BCWI Yearbook 2022
4. McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

Startups demonstrate lower barriers for women to occupy roles across all functions

Women's representation by functional roles

Function	Women's representation across all startups	Women's representation at top 10%[1]
HR/admin	49%	59%
Customer service	32%	49%
Marketing	31%	43%
R&D	21%	36%
Finance	34%	36%
Sales	25%	33%
Tech/product development	20%	26%

Legend:
- Women's representation across all startups
- Women's representation at top 10%[1] of startups measured on gender equity

In corporates, women representation in sales is 19%[2] and finance is 21%[3]

However, while women and men start together, tenure and seniority don't keep pace for women

	Experience	<5 years	5–10 years	>10 years

CXO/SVP
- Women: 1% | 7% | 24%
- Men: 2% | 10% | 40%

Director/VP
- Women: 13% | 32% | 34%
- Men: 14% | 42% | 42%

Manager
- Women: 45% | 38% | 38%
- Men: 45% | 36% | 17%

Entry-level
- Women: 38% | 21% | 2%
- Men: 39% | 11% | 1%
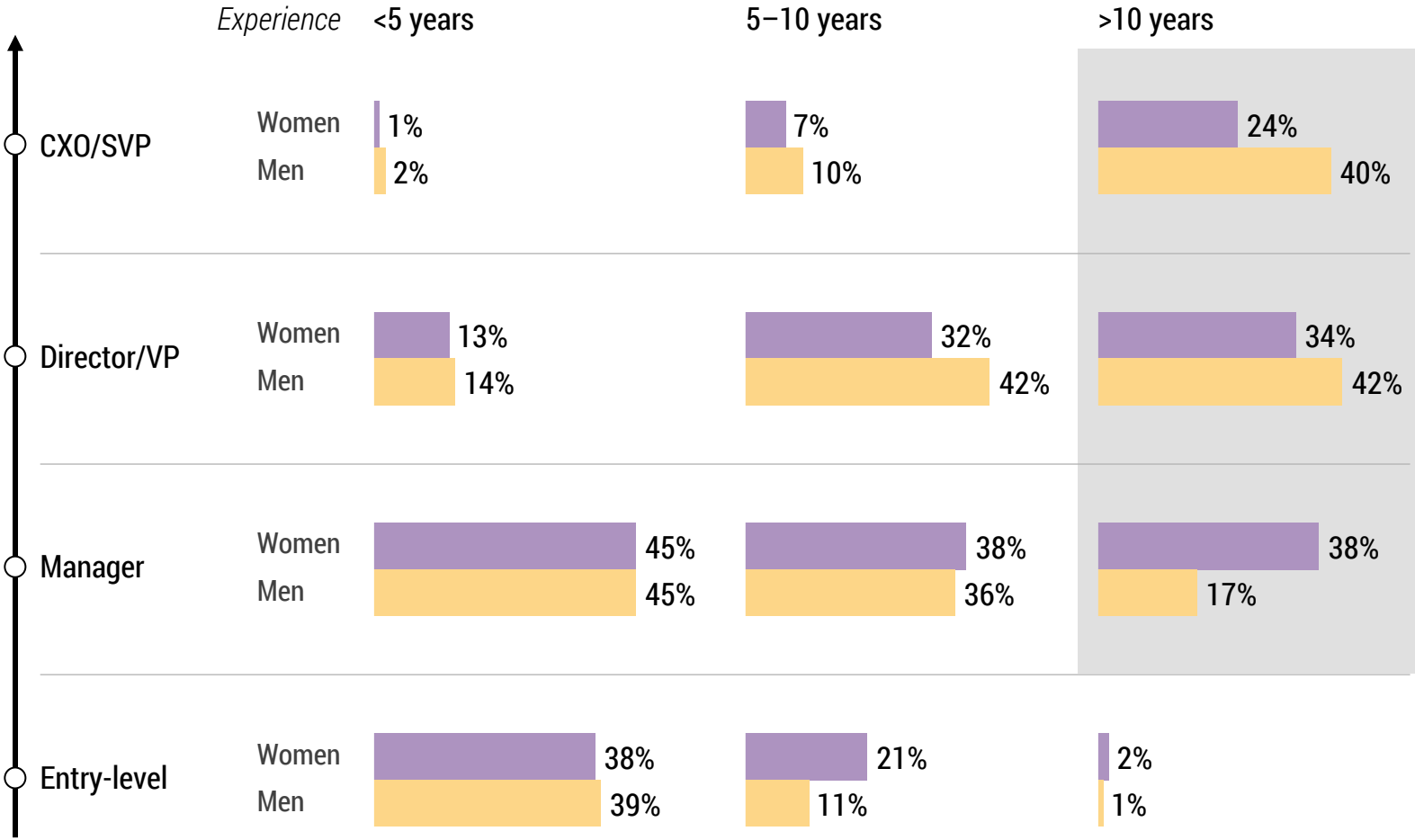
Over 10 years in, 8 out of 10 men in startups occupy Director/VP positions or higher, compared to about 5 in 10 women

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

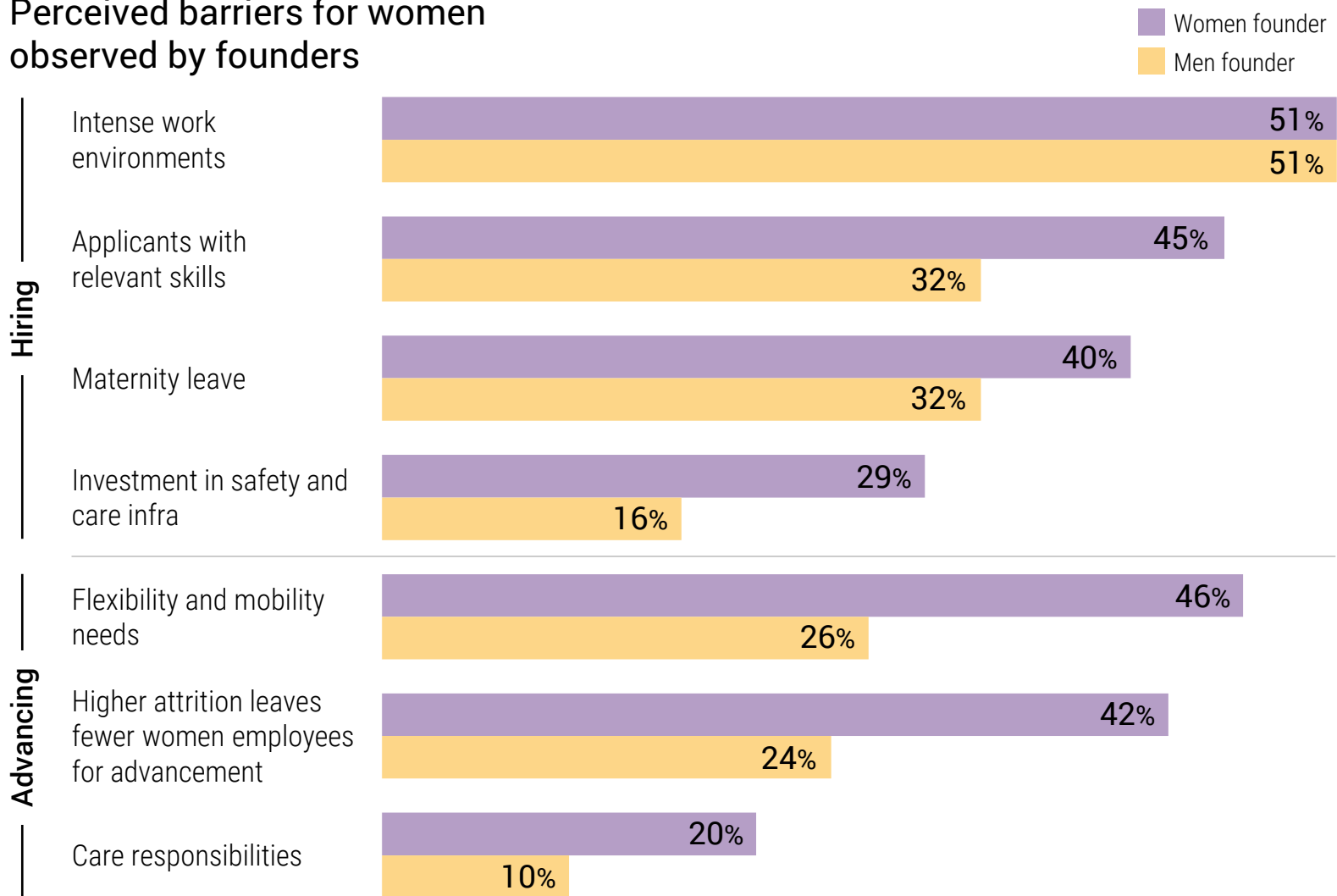# Women-led startups perform better on women's representation across functions

FOUNDER(S)

Men only

At least one woman

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Men only	Function	At least one woman
32%	Overall	48%
23%	Sales	28%
17%	Tech/product development	25%
14%	R&D	29%
27%	Customer service	39%
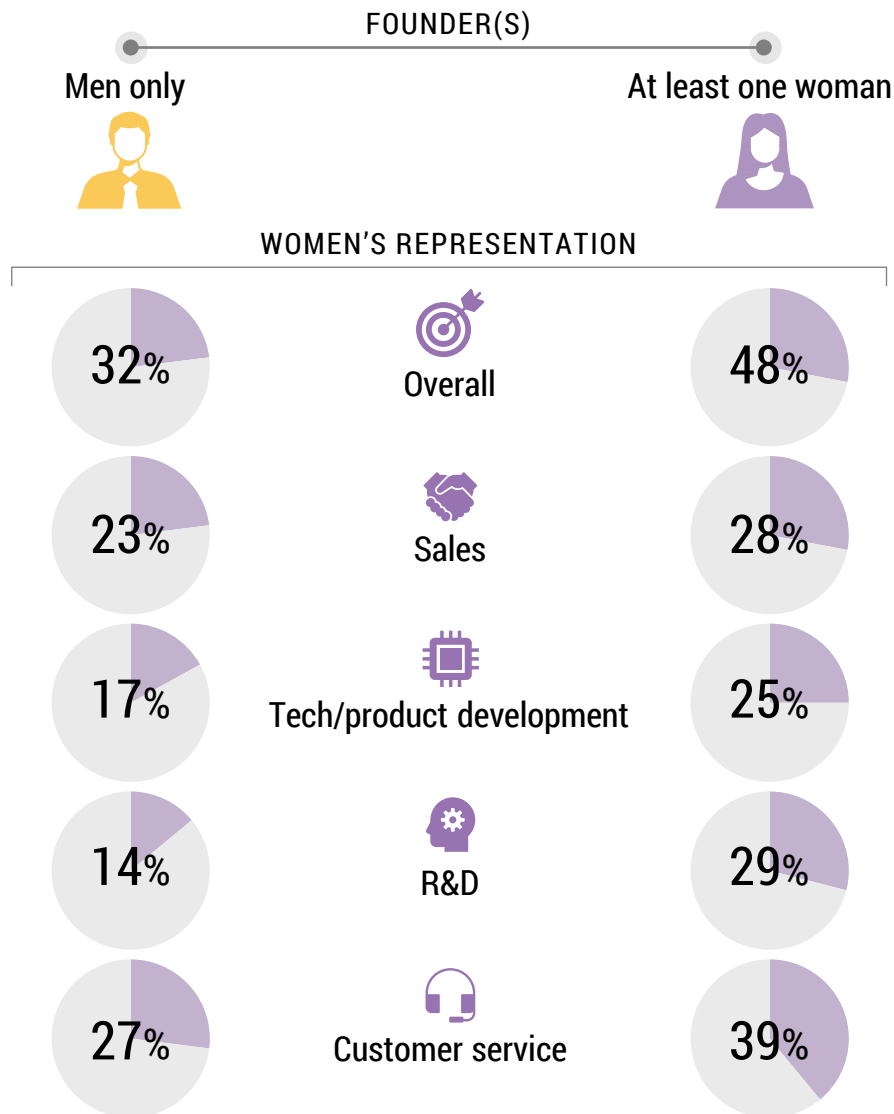
Startups with a woman founder have **2.5x women** in senior roles compared to men-only founders

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

# Women founders are more acutely aware of barriers for women including safety and care responsibilities ...

Perceived barriers for women observed by founders

Legend:
- Women founder (purple)
- Men founder (yellow)

Hiring

Barrier	Women founder	Men founder
Intense work environments	51%	51%
Applicants with relevant skills	45%	32%
Maternity leave	40%	32%
Investment in safety and care infra	29%	16%

Advancing

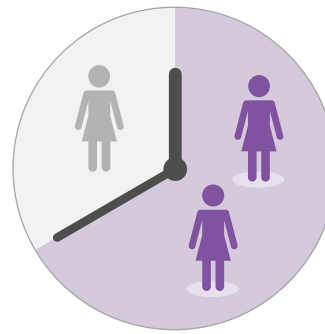| Barrier	Women founder	Men founder
Flexibility and mobility needs	46%	26%
Higher attrition leaves fewer women employees for advancement	42%	24%
Care responsibilities	20%	10%

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

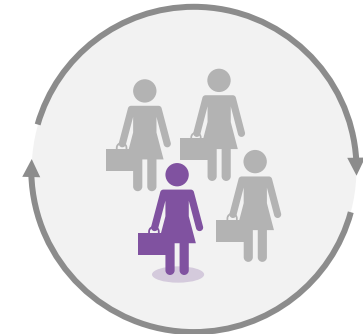# ... and are consequently more likely to introduce policies to address them
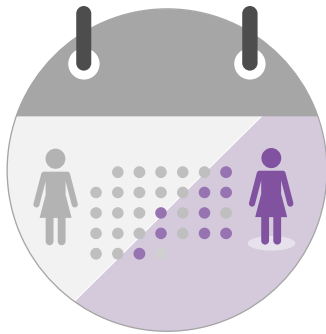
1 in 2
offer

Flexible
workdays

2 in 3
offer

Flexible
working hours

1 in 4
offer

Return to
work program

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER survey

4

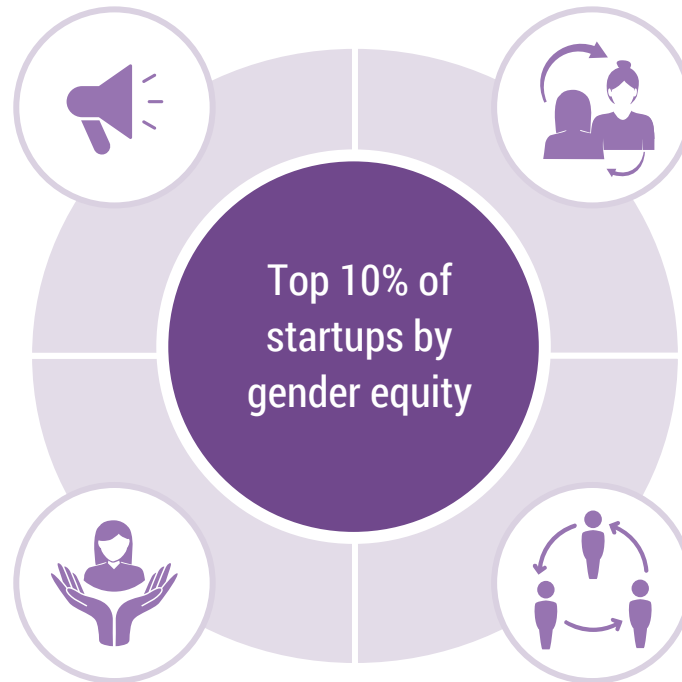# Culture is key to aligning behaviours, practices and policies

An inclusive culture has critical first and second order benefits

98% employees say they can be their **authentic self without fear**

95% women **felt mentored** by senior women leaders

Top 10% of startups by gender equity

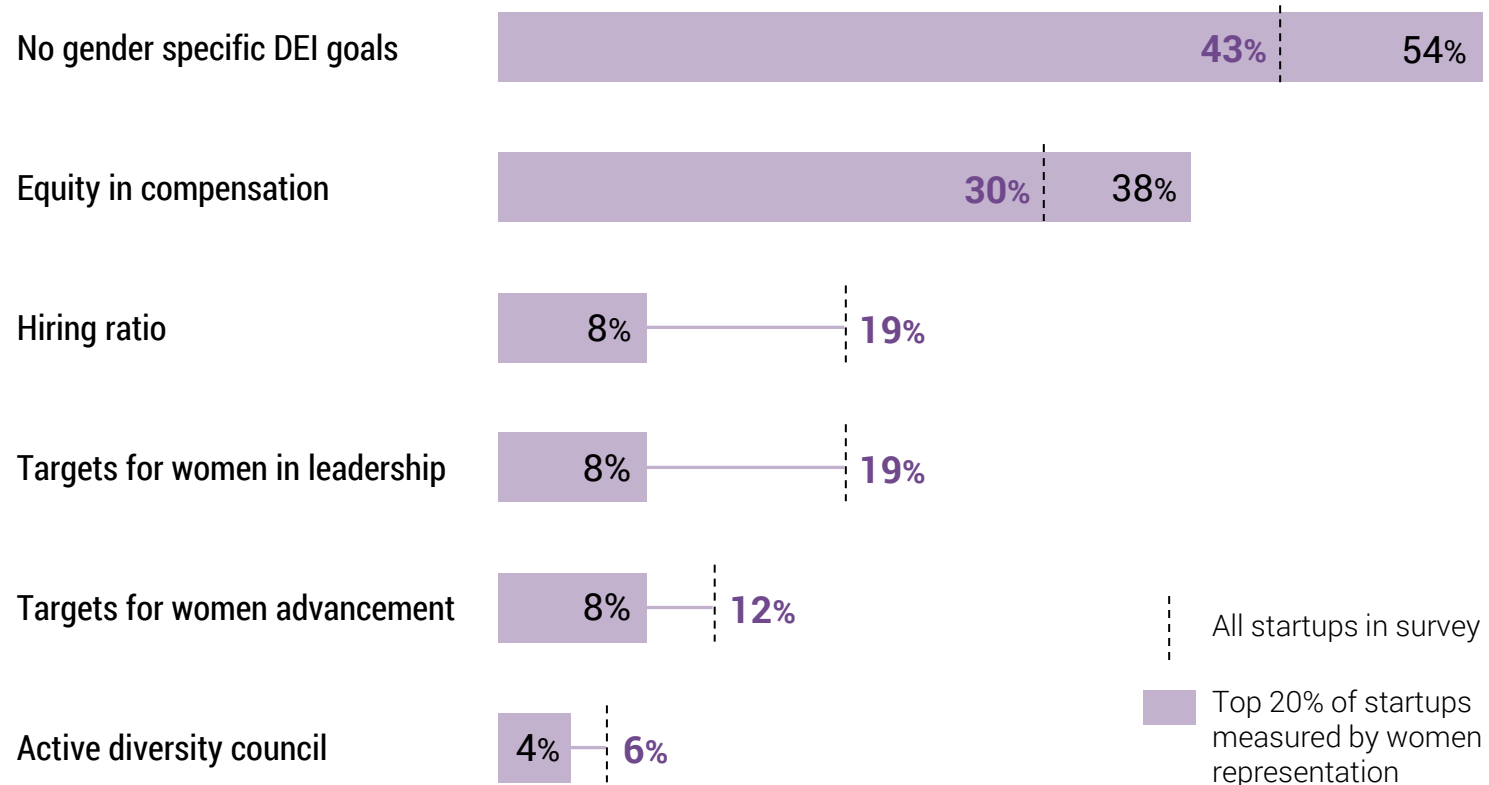**84**% women **felt safe** in escalating bias

93% employees say there is an **inclusive environment**

Source: WISER survey

Startups can use transparent gender goals to clarify intent; though top performers don't rely on goals alone

Gender specific DEI goals

Category	All startups in survey	Top 20% of startups
No gender specific DEI goals	43%	54%
Equity in compensation	30%	38%
Hiring ratio	19%	8%
Targets for women in leadership	19%	8%
Targets for women advancement	12%	8%
Active diversity council	6%	4%

Legend:
- All startups in survey
- Top 20% of startups measured by women representation

Source: WISER survey

Everyone has a role to play in advancing women's careers in startups

Leaders

Allocate time and attention to signal their commitment to equity

34% of employees join startups because of inspiring founders

Managers

Support all members of their team equally

60% of employees believe their managers are invested in their growth

HR

Develop fair, safe and inclusive policies and processes

81% of employees feel safe at their workplace

Source: WISER survey

What do great leaders do?

Sponsor

Build a sense of ownership, be accountable for their success and create psychological safety

Role model

Display inclusive behavior, protect share of voice and publicly value women's talent

Set targets

Make commitments to explicit and measurable goals for equity that are treated as seriously as any other strategic goal

❝

Role modelling can be one of the fastest and most impactful way to inspire people

– Founder of an e-commerce platform

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER interviews

Leadership actions: Examples

Indian home services startup

Founder set a **30% goal for women** in senior leadership by 2025

25 accountable sponsors and mentors were assigned to emerging women leaders and **budget for tailored formal coaching** was set aside

Step-back sessions were held during off-sites to reinforce commitment

SaaS startup

Founder publicly **committed to 33% women representation**

Vision was adopted by all function leaders

Startup **achieved target** by end of year

Source: WISER interviews

What do standout managers do?

Keep their eyes open

Understand conscious and unconscious biases and sources of inequality

Advance

Proactively provide guidance, exposure and opportunities to women

Reach out

Ask women what they need, try different solutions and ask for feedback

"

My experience in the organization is shaped by
my manager more than anyone else in the company

– Woman employee in a SaaS startup

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER interviews

Pro-active support from managers: Examples

Software services startup

Women engineers didn't feel included and weren't speaking up

Managers conducted **focus group discussions** to hear their concerns

Following this, **a formal mentorship program** for individuals was set-up

SaaS startup

Team leaders support **women returning after career breaks**, helping them to re-integrate and set work-life balance

An **'Unconscious Bias'** program at the startup helped educate all employees

Source: WISER interviews

What does a supportive HR do?

Record and track progress

Put equality goals at the heart of scorecards and other reporting

Create safe spaces

Support women and men alike to speak up

Nail the basics

Clarify and implement minimum workplace expectations
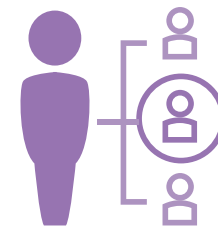
Minimum workplace policies			
	Health	:	Comprehensive health insurance Relaxation/ meditation spaces
	Pay	:	Pay parity across roles
	Flexibility	:	Maternity leave Flexible leave
	Safety	:	Company vehicles or carpool for late work hours

" For us, DEI is not an initiative, but part of life

— CHRO of a SaaS startup

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER interviews

HR-led practices to advance gender equity: Examples

SaaS startup

A "**Career Restart**" program helps selected women with interview and resume trainings to rebuild their confidence

An **"Equal Work, Equal Pay"** policy guarantees equal pay to all for the same role

The startup has a **wellness room and a children's room** on campus

Online pet store

The startup has mandated at least **50% of resumes for women** to be shortlisted for all roles

Source: WISER interviews

What do self-aware employees themselves do?

WOMEN

Engage
Show up, voice concerns and offer solutions

Be there for one another
Lend an ear and check in as well as set formal mechanisms for mentorship and development

Act
When opportunity presents itself, take it

MEN

Listen
The best way to know what's on women's minds is to ask them and let them tell you

Enable
Give women colleagues their share of space and voice and speak up for fairness

Celebrate
Be equal opportunity cheerleaders

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER interviews

Select practices observed at startups committed to gender equity

Hiring

Diversity mandates and goals

Mixed gender interview panels

Gender-neutral job descriptions

Targeted internships for women

Retention

Pay parity policy

Sponsorship/mentorship

Gender sensitization training

Advancement

Diversity mandates for management

Leadership development programs

Advancement transparency

Return to Work

Post maternity return to work programs

Career break restart programs

Source: McKinsey analysis; WISER interviews

Acknowledgements

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MD
Peak XV Partners

Shekhar Kirani
Partner
Accel

Suman Gopalan
Ex-CHRO
Freshworks

Vivek Pandit
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President
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A very special thank you to Neha Mathur, Panchali Das, Saipriya Sarangan, Shreyasi Singh and Varun Sadana for their insights.

Methodology

The "Women in India's Startup Ecosystem Report" brings together insights from 200+ Indian startups covering 111 founders, 117 HR leads, and almost 800 employees across different sectors and startup stages. We gathered these insights through two channels.

Quantitative Survey

We developed three different survey tools:

1. Founder Survey: Surveyed 111 founders (69 women, 42 men) on entrepreneurial motivations and DE&I practices.

2. HR Lead Survey: Gathered insights from 117 HR leads on recruitment, policies, employee growth, and diversity.

3. Employee Survey: Surveyed 532 startup employees on organizational culture, flexibility, and DE&I.

In addition, the top ten% of startups (in terms of women's representation across aspects including overall workforce, senior leadership positions, and functional areas) were identified based on the HR Lead survey and an additional survey was undertaken with 223 employees from these shortlisted startups. Participation in this survey was voluntary, to ensure greater inclusion, the ACT team made multiple outreach efforts through their partners and networks; hence the sampling is not representative. The employee respondents opted to be a part of the initiative through social media outreach. The sampling for founders and employees was carried out as separate exercises and the sample pool does not overlap.

Qualitative Interviews

We conducted:

1. A total of 27 in-depth interviews (IDI) with 11 founders, 8 HR leads, and 8 employees from varied backgrounds.

2. Three FGDs across three startups, with a total of 27 employees.

We developed three IDI guides (Founder, HR Lead, and Employee) and one focus group discussion (FGD) guide for employees. Discussions centred on workplace experiences to supplement our quantitative insights. To maintain confidentiality, identifiers were anonymized, and some quotes were modified for clarity.