# ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INVESTMENT: BREAKING BARRIERS FOR FEMALE FOUNDERS

Minutes

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| Date | 17 June 2025 |
| Time | 10:00 – 11:00 |
| Venue | Portcullis House Meeting Room M and via Zoom |
| Chair | Catherine Fookes, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Monmouthshire |
| Speakers | Debbie Wosskow OBE, Co-Chair, Invest in Women Taskforce<br><br>Professor Ute Stephan, Professor of Entrepreneurship, King's College London<br><br>Teresa Boughey, CEO of Jungle HR, Founder of Inclusion 247, and Working Party Advisory Board Member of the Women and Enterprise APPG |
| Theme/ Background information | While female entrepreneurship in the UK continues to grow, conditions for women seeking investment are reportedly getting worse, not better. Businesses led by all-women founding teams received just 1.8% of all venture capital funding in the first half of 2024—down from 2.5% in 2023.<br><br>These figures underscore the urgent need for targeted intervention. Research shows that female investors are twice as likely to invest in women, yet representation in investment decision-making remains low.<br><br>Addressing this inequity requires increased visibility, better data, and policy that supports inclusive investment practices.<br><br>This session explored:<br><br>• The realities facing female founders in today's investment landscape<br>• The role of bias and pattern-matching in venture capital decision-making<br>• The importance of representation on investment teams<br>• Policy levers and industry-led solutions to unlock capital for women-led businesses |

Catherine Fookes opened the session by welcoming attendees and introducing the theme of the discussion: *'Entrepreneurship and Breaking Barriers'*. She noted the timeliness of the topic, drawing on her work as a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, which had recently hosted a roundtable in Birmingham on female entrepreneurship and explored whether British business should consider setting specific targets to better support women entrepreneurs.

Catherine highlighted the scale of the challenges facing women, including the fact that completing a funding application can take up to 80 hours. She also expressed concern that investment in women-founded teams has decreased, while funding for all-male teams has increased. She then introduced the first speaker, Debbie Wosskow OBE, Co-Chair of the Invest in Women Taskforce.

Debbie Wosskow began by stating that the UK is currently not a supportive environment for female entrepreneurs. Despite data showing that female-led businesses yield better returns than their male-led counterparts, the amount of capital allocated to women has declined, while investment in all-male founding teams has risen. She attributed part of this trend to the growth of the artificial intelligence sector, in which women are significantly underrepresented among founders.

Debbie commended Barclays for working to reshape the conversation around women, business, and finance. She argued that while networking and mentoring are often discussed, the conversation must also focus on money. Female-led businesses need access to capital. Currently, only 15% of investment committee members are women, a disparity that must be addressed.

She noted that the Invest in Women Taskforce met its original £250 million funding target in November. However, she stressed the need for other banks to follow the example of Barclays, and for more financial institutions who are signatories of the Mansion House Compact to act. She emphasised that the aim of the taskforce is to promote positive, profit-driven action. By encouraging pension funds and banks to view female entrepreneurship as a source of untapped profit, the initiative positions gender equity not only as a social good but as a powerful economic opportunity for the UK.

Catherine then introduced Professor Ute Stephan, who offered a broader perspective on entrepreneurship and systemic barriers. Professor Stephan noted that entrepreneurship is still commonly perceived as a male-dominated field, which deters many women from applying for funding or even seeing themselves as entrepreneurs. She explained that many female entrepreneurs assume that funding is not meant for them and do not engage with existing support systems. She suggested that social enterprise, which often delivers wider social benefits, could provide a viable alternative.

She drew attention to the impact of unpaid care work, particularly childcare and eldercare, on women's entrepreneurial potential. These responsibilities tend to peak during midlife, precisely when many women have the most to contribute professionally.

To address these structural issues, Professor Stephan proposed expanding the start-up loan scheme to better support social enterprises, or weaving such support into existing schemes. She also advocated for the continuation of Social Investment Tax Relief. She emphasised the value of small business growth programmes that offer upskilling and networking opportunities, suggesting that gender quotas could be introduced to ensure women are properly represented. In-person attendance at such programmes is vital, so support for childcare must be integrated to allow full participation.

She pointed out that the UK is one of the most expensive and inaccessible childcare markets in the world. In addition, she highlighted how female entrepreneurs often underpay themselves and are less likely to claim salaries or benefits such as maternity pay. Professor Stephan also called for a more inclusive understanding of entrepreneurship, one that moves away from the “Silicon Valley” ideal and acknowledges that entrepreneurship is one of the most stressful career paths. She suggested embedding resilience into entrepreneurial support structures to mitigate the risk of poor mental health and burnout.

Catherine next introduced Teresa Boughey, who focused on the challenges and opportunities for women scaling up their businesses. Teresa stressed that supporting women in growing their enterprises is essential if we want to boost the UK economy.

She pointed out that many women are excluded long before the investment conversation begins. She emphasised that investment decisions are not made in isolation, they are shaped by existing networks, biases, and assumptions. Teresa highlighted the growing importance of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), noting that female investors are twice as likely to invest in female entrepreneurs, yet they remain underrepresented in the investment ecosystem.

She referenced the *Women in Enterprise* APPG report, which underscores the need for consistent and disaggregated data. Teresa argued that while mentoring women entrepreneurs is important, educating investors is even more critical. She concluded by challenging the dominant narrative that women need to be endlessly resilient, and instead called for the business environment itself to be reshaped so that resilience is not the sole requirement for success.

During the Q&A, Catherine returned to the issue of pay disparity and business performance. She asked how it could be that, as Professor Stephan noted, women pay themselves less, while according to Debbie Wosskow, female-led businesses deliver better returns. Debbie clarified that her data related to venture capital: although women raise less funding, they tend to generate stronger returns on the capital they do receive.

Debbie then shared an anecdote from London Tech Week, where a woman was turned away from an event because she brought her baby, highlighting the ongoing exclusion of women in professional spaces. She warned against pigeonholing women into social enterprises alone and argued that women should feel empowered to pursue wealth and bold ambitions. She called for a venture capital ecosystem that enables women to access the same transformative opportunities once available to founders of companies like PayPal and Airbnb.

Professor Stephan responded with caution, expressing concern about applying the Silicon Valley model universally. She argued that entrepreneurship must reflect a diversity of motivations and approaches. She reiterated that in social enterprise models, gender equity is achievable, with equal representation of men and women. She also reaffirmed that women tend to pay themselves less than men in equivalent roles.

Catherine then asked whether there were international models the UK could learn from. Noreen Burroughes, Chair of the International Stream of the Women and Enterprise APPG, responded by comparing the UK with Europe. She highlighted the work of the European Investment Bank, which has dedicated funding streams to support banks working with women entrepreneurs. However, she stressed that a strong business case is essential, as if investors cannot see the potential for profit, they will not engage.

Marianne Schenle from Maternity Action welcomed the discussion around childcare and working conditions. She pointed out that self-employed women receiving maternity allowance face greater restrictions than employed women receiving statutory maternity pay. She asked what more could be done to support female entrepreneurs beyond pay and childcare.

Debbie responded by calling for a distinction between different types of female entrepreneurs. Many women are “founder-plus-one”, and many are running a business while also being the main caregiver or breadwinner. These women are unlikely to grant themselves parental leave or access certain tax breaks. She stressed the importance of raising awareness about the financial support already available, such as the first £250,000 tax relief introduced under Tony Blair for higher-rate taxpayers.

Catherine noted that one recurring theme in the discussion was the reluctance of women to ask for money, whether through funding applications or pay negotiations. Nadia Ahrazem from UCL asked how women could better support one another across the sector to build stronger pipelines of female entrepreneurs.

Teresa concluded by responding to a question from the chat about the difficulty of accessing funding information. She explained that although many resources exist, they are scattered across different platforms and thus hard to find. She noted that the APPG on Women in Enterprise has previously called for the creation of a centralised online hub to signpost funding, support, and guidance more effectively.

Catherine expressed her gratitude to everyone for their attendance.

## Chat Comments

Emma Thomas / The Triple Shift
Menopause… niche – yes, only impacts 51% of the population…!

Lisa Barnwell
When I was setting up a mum and baby clinic and later a consultancy supporting working parents called Bumps and the Boardroom, a senior male leader told me it was too niche and not what business would take seriously.

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network
I'm a bootstrapped business owner and run a careers platform for early career talent and an inclusion consultancy – The LMF Network. We reach 1 million people, have a 90% success rate and have worked with 100+ business partners across 24 countries. We are a social enterprise.
Useful links:
LinkedIn – https://www.linkedin.com/in/sonyabarlow
Website – https://www.lmfnetwork.org/
Newsletter – https://substack.com/@lmfnetwork

Mandy St John Davey MBE
Agree with the points raised by Teresa Boughey – women are often penalised before they even get into the pitch room.

There's already great work happening: I was on the Welsh Government/South Wales University expert panel that produced a 10-step framework to support female entrepreneurs. This was supported by Economy Minister Ken Skates.

Here's the report:
https://www.southwales.ac.uk/media/university-of-south-wales/site-assets/documents/news-/2021/02-february/supporting-entrepreneurial-women-in-wales-an-approach-for-wales.pdf

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network
For the data – I want to see metrics on intersectional women scaling their businesses, not just starting them. It's easy to start a business; it's much harder to scale one.

Mandy St John Davey MBE
Also wanted to highlight Angels Invest Wales – the largest group of female investors and mentors in Wales. Backed by the Welsh Government and the Development Bank of Wales:
https://developmentbank.wales/other-services/angels-invest-wales

Emma Thomas / The Triple Shift
Denmark provides excellent childcare that costs 25% of what it does here.
Why can't we do the same?

Adele Johnston
Is there a central place to search for funding, grants, and financial support for businesses addressing women's health and menopause care – especially given the lack of UK government funding in this area? This question is aimed more at private funding.

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network
As a social enterprise, we're constantly navigating confusing perceptions:
"Are you a charity?"
"Do you even need funding?"
"Shouldn't you be tax efficient?"
We get told we're not really a business 😅
To Debbie's earlier point – I want to become an angel investor, but it's incredibly hard to navigate all the information.

Mandy St John Davey MBE
In my experience, £2K is a realistic entry point to start angel investing.

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network

Most of my financial knowledge (investment, savings, etc.) came from a man mentoring me – which I'm grateful for. But I'd also love to be surrounded by women who've been through the process.

Women's Resource Centre
In response to Sonya: Let's create and support our own funding models – ones that work for women.

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network We run one of the largest mentoring programmes in the UK with a 90% success rate. Always looking for mentors and mentees – professionals and career developers!
https://www.lmfnetwork.org/
Regarding the current Imperial programme – how can I get involved? I support many universities as an Entrepreneur in Residence, but those roles came through networks. Who you know matters, right?

Women's Resource Centre
Would the panel support requiring venture capital firms that receive public money (e.g. through British Business Bank) to publish diversity metrics and impact assessments?

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network
Awards for women should come with more than a certificate.
How about grants, access to networks, or introductions?
A line on your LinkedIn isn't enough!

Sonya Barlow, CEO, LMF Network Another challenge: once you get visibility, pricing and pitching become harder. You start to underplay yourself.