

A network of hands holding red strings against a black background. The hands are positioned at various points around the frame, with red strings connecting them to form a complex web. Some hands are adorned with jewelry like bangles, bracelets, and flower-shaped ornaments. The overall composition suggests a interconnected community or a shared challenge.

CXXO
A Kalaari Capital Initiative

The

₹4 PROBLEM

Women founders and the market gap hiding in plain sight

A Kalaari CXXO Report

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THIS ISN'T A DIVERSITY REPORT.

This is about a market failure so spectacular, it is costing India billions in unrealized potential.

The women are here. The talent is here. The ambition is here. The money? It's going somewhere else.

Sources: McKinsey Global Institute, The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia-Pacific (2018) IFC / Protium estimates based on credit gap data for women-led MSMEs in India IFC data, cited in WEF/Thomson Reuters Foundation (2023) — 0.3% of VC funding to women-led startups in 2021 Boston Consulting Group — women-founded companies performance data OECD / Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi), Bridging the Finance Gap for Women Entrepreneurs (2025)

The cost of this capital misallocation registers at macroeconomic scale. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that India could add \$770 billion to its GDP by advancing women's economic participation, representing an 18% uplift to GDP at current levels.¹ While this figure captures the broader workforce opportunity, the venture capital funding gap is a concentrated expression of the same structural inefficiency. Women-led businesses in India face an unmet credit gap exceeding \$158 billion,² yet receive just 0.3% of the country's venture capital.³ This is despite evidence from BCG that women-founded companies generate 10% higher cumulative revenue over five years and build workforces that are three times more gender-inclusive.⁴ At the global level, the OECD and We-Fi estimate that closing the financing gap for women entrepreneurs could unlock \$5–6 trillion in net value creation.⁵ The arithmetic is straightforward: systematically underfunding a founder segment that demonstrably delivers superior capital efficiency is a GDP leak. Every rupee that doesn't flow to a high-performing women-led venture is a rupee that earns less than it could elsewhere in the portfolio and in the economy.

THE NUMBERS

Macro-level ecosystem data from institutional sources: AISHE enrollment figures, Tracxn funding data, NIRF institutional rankings, and publicly available industry reports.

THE STORIES

Conversations with 140+ founders, operators, and investors, 92 women, 55 men, who shared their experiences navigating India's startup landscape.

HOW WE BUILT THIS REPORT

Where you see hard numbers, they come from public data. Where you see founder insights, they come from real conversations.

A NOTE FROM VANI KOLA



Imagine two people setting out to climb a mountain. Same fitness level, same determination, same goal. One is shown a well-worn trail, mapped, marked, with basecamp coordinates and a network of fellow climbers who've done it before. The other is handed a Machete, pick and shovel and told to create a new path.

Same destination. Same motivation. Same drive. Who turns back halfway?

This isn't a story about Grit. It's a story about infrastructure, and how support systems work. About the difference between a path that exists and one that has to be carved in real time, often alone, with no one ahead to say "yes, this is the right direction." The data in this report will not surprise anyone who has been paying attention.

Women are showing up in STEM classrooms, in JEE exam halls, in India's fastest-growing companies. But they are not showing up in the halls of power and in leadership roles in proportionate numbers.

Here's what I've learned in two decades of investing: alpha outcomes live in the gaps between what the market believes and what is actually true. When capital concentrates around pattern-matched familiarity (same schools, same companies, same networks) it creates blind spots. Blind spots create inefficiency. And inefficiency, for those willing to see it, creates opportunity.

The funding gap isn't just a failure of equity. It's a failure of price discovery. When an entire category of founders is systematically underestimated, the market isn't working properly, which means there is alpha left sitting on the table for anyone willing to pick it up.

Women are choosing science because they want to, building companies because they see problems worth solving. The pipeline isn't empty. It just isn't a steady force. What the data reveals is where the trail disappears.

A NOTE FROM VANI KOLA



Where networks close doors, where capital flows to pattern-matched familiarity, and where the climb becomes a solo expedition without maps or markers. ₹4 out of every ₹100 raised by founders from India's most powerful startup networks goes to women. That's not a pipeline problem. That's a path problem. And for those of us in the business of outlier returns, it should also register as something else: a massive market inefficiency.

CXXO was envisioned to capture that alpha. Not through charity, not through special treatment, not through the kind of visibility that puts a few women pioneers on a pedestal while leaving the underlying system unchanged.

We hold our female founders to the same standards as any founder we back, the same rigour, expectations, and accountability. The difference is that we show up as real partners with capital and conviction aware of patterns that don't favor women. We're not in the business of social change. We're in the business of backing founders who the market has systematically undervalued.

This report is an honest accounting of our findings. It names what isn't working without massaging data to tell a more palatable story.

But it's not about blame, because there's enough of that to go around, and blame rarely changes anything. The point is to see clearly so we can build differently. The women are already climbing. The talent is already here. What we haven't built yet are the trails that let that talent compound at the same rate as everyone else. We believe it's time to build them, not because it's the right thing to do (though it is) but because the returns are there for anyone paying attention.

The market is mispriced. The opportunity is real. And CXXO intends to capture it.



At Tracxn, we've been tracking the growth of the Indian startup ecosystem because we believe this is one of the most pivotal epochs in our country's economic history, one that will shape what our future looks like for decades to come. And on the surface, it's a glorious story. Win after win. A maturing ecosystem that the world is watching. But the moment you peel back even one layer, you realize that very different people have very different levels of access to this ecosystem.

That's something we've been documenting for a long time, and it's exactly why we partnered with Kalaari and CXXO on this report. What Kalaari is doing through CXXO is one of the most meaningful interventions in the ecosystem today when it comes to building a more equitably representative founder landscape. Whether it's the deliberate capital allocation or the kind of active sponsorship that CXXO brings to the table, all of it is a direct, explicit response to the gaps that our data at Tracxn has consistently highlighted.

NEHA SINGH
Co-founder and CEO Tracxn



HERE'S A STAT

THAT SHOULD MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE :

₹4

For every ₹100 raised by
founders from India's most
powerful startup networks,
only ₹4 goes to women.

Not ₹40. Not ₹14. Four rupees.

Source: Tracxn data on funding raised by founders from India's top startup alumni networks, 2020-2024.

THE BOTTOM LINE, UPFRONT

1

**THE PIPELINE
ISN'T BROKEN.
IT'S FILTERED.**

Girls are choosing STEM at record rates. They're being filtered out afterward.

2

**NETWORKS ARE
ACCELERANTS.
BUT ONLY FOR SOME.**

India's startup mafias are launching unicorns. Women aren't in those rooms.

3

**THE VC TABLE
SHAPES WHO
GETS FUNDED.**

Women are 38% of analysts at VC funds, but only 16% at partner level.

4

**THIS ISN'T
CHARITY.
IT'S ALPHA.**

The opportunity cost of ignoring half the talent pool is staggering.

PART ONE

THE WOMEN ARE SHOWING UP

The pipeline excuse doesn't hold up anymore.

THE STORY YOU'VE HEARD

Indian girls aren't interested in STEM.

Their parents push them toward "safe" careers.

They don't have the aptitude.

THE STORY THE DATA TELLS

**>> THAT'S
SIMPLY
UNTRUE .**

**LET'S KILL
A MYTH**

THE GIRLS ARE SHOWING UP.
IN HISTORIC
NUMBERS

1.7X

**INCREASE IN GIRLS
ENROLLED IN HIGH
SCHOOL SCIENCE**
2013-2024

2X

**INCREASE IN WOMEN
REGISTERING FOR JEE**
2015-2025

43%

**OF STEM GRADUATES
REGISTERING FOR JEE
ARE NOW WOMEN**
As of 2024

The pipeline isn't empty. So where does it break?

Sources: AISHE enrollment data (36.3L in 2013 → 61L in 2024); JEE registration data (22,355 in 2015 → 43,413 in 2025); AISHE graduate data 2024



I studied engineering at IIT Kharagpur, one of the country's leading institutions, yet there were only 3 women in a class of 120. The gap doesn't begin at funding; it starts much earlier. Girls are entering STEM, but many are filtered out by environment, access, and support systems long before entrepreneurship becomes an option. By the time capital enters the conversation, the pipeline has already narrowed.

MALINI ADAPUREDDY
Founder and CEO, Deconstruct



WE TALKED TO WOMEN FOUNDERS.

HERE'S WHAT MANY OF THEM TOLD US

A striking number of women founders we spoke to had turned down colleges they'd qualified for. When we asked why, the answers weren't about aptitude.

They were about hostels. About safety. About distance from home.

Based on conversations with 48 women founders and 23 men founders.

This is a pattern we heard again and again, not just from founders, but from operators and investors who watched talented women self-select out of the institutions that produce India's startup networks.

MORE THAN HALF

CHOSE SCIENCE BY CHOICE

Among the women founders we surveyed, 56% who chose science in high school did so out of genuine academic interest and career goals, **not parental pressure, not societal expectation. Choice.**

Based on survey data, 17/30 female founders with science backgrounds.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“
"No hostel
availability."
”

“
"Too far from my home
city."
”

“
"Not applied due to
family and funds
constraints."
”

“
"Found a viable option in
my home city — staying
at home seemed safer."
”

“
"Campus on the
outskirts of the city
seemed unsafe."
”

“
"Combination of location —
was not allowed to go out
of town."
”

The infrastructure that follows their choices is failing them.

WOMEN FOUNDERS STAYED CLOSER TO HOME

THE DATA TELLS YOU WHY.

63% WOMEN FOUNDERS

attended undergrad in their home city or a nearby city, compared to 43% of men. This isn't a pipeline problem.

It's a pattern driven by safety concerns and family pressure, not preference.

When interest exists, but infrastructure doesn't, that's not a talent problem. It's a systems problem. And systems problems have investable solutions.

PART TWO

**INDIA'S STARTUP
MAFIAS ARE
FAILING
WOMEN**

The networks that mint unicorns are leaving women out of the minting.



When you don't have a mafia behind you, you have to build trust from scratch every single time. That's the reality for most women founders- no warm intro, no social proof from a known network, just you and your deck. It's not impossible, but it's a longer road, and investors should acknowledge that.

RADHIKA GHAI
Co-founder and CEO,
kindlife



WHAT'S A

STARTUP MAFIA?

Silicon Valley had the PayPal Mafia — alumni who founded YouTube, Tesla, LinkedIn. India has its own. Companies like Flipkart, Freshworks, and Razorpay have become founder factories.

OUR DEFINITION

**COMPANIES WHERE AT LEAST 10
ALUMNI HAVE BECOME VENTURE-
BACKED FOUNDERS.**

5,000+

**FOUNDERS LAUNCHED
~1,500 FUNDED STARTUPS**

20+

**UNICORNS TRACE BACK
TO THESE NETWORKS**

1 IN 5

**INDIAN UNICORNS
STEMS FROM MAFIAS**

0.6X

Women are 0.6x as likely to emerge as founders from these networks vs. the broader ecosystem

WORSE THAN THE ECOSYSTEM AVERAGE.

THE MATH IS UNFORGIVING.

General Ecosystem

~14%
WOMEN FOUNDERS

Mafia Networks

~9%
WOMEN FOUNDERS

Bottom line: The networks that mint unicorns are leaving women out of the minting.

ONCE WOMEN ARE IN THESE NETWORKS,
SURELY THE CAPITAL FLOWS EQUALLY? **NO.**

₹4 : ₹1000

Same networks. Same pedigree. Same rooms.
Wildly different capital access.

26% → 9%

26%
OF WORKFORCE →

9%
BECOME MAFIA FOUNDERS

That gap is the leak. And it's not being fixed by time or good intentions.

PART THREE

**WHAT'S
ACTUALLY
HOLDING
WOMEN BACK**

We asked founders. Here's what we heard.

THE BARRIERS AREN'T THE SAME.

DIFFERENT BARRIERS REQUIRE DIFFERENT INTERVENTIONS.

Female founders:

35% FUNDING ACCESS
23% TEAM BUILDING

Male Founders:

26% FUNDING ACCESS
35% TEAM BUILDING

When we asked founders about their biggest challenge, the answers split sharply along gender lines — women overwhelmingly pointed to funding access, while men were equally likely to cite team-building.

“

**I NEED SPOUSAL SUPPORT
AND RELIEF FROM GUILT
DUE TO PERSONAL/FAMILY
RESPONSIBILITIES.**

”

BURDEN OF CHOICE.

This is a gender-specific barrier. It doesn't show up in the male founder dataset.

And it can't be solved by accelerators or pitch coaching.

PART FOUR

**WHO DECIDES
WHO GETS
FUNDED**

We mapped 100+ VC firms and 4,000+ professionals.

THE PIPELINE EXISTS . THE CEILING DOESN'T MOVE .

VC ANALYSTS OVERALL

38%
are women

AT PARTNER LEVEL

16%
are women

It thins precisely where capital decisions happen.

Source: CXXO analysis of 100+ Indian VC firms, 4,000+ professionals (LinkedIn data, 2024)



Walk in with a point of view, not just a pitch. I've found that investors respond to conviction more than credentials, and women founders often undersell how much they actually know. You've built this. You know things about your customer that no one in that room does. Lead with that.

DIKSHA PANDE
Co-founder, Samosa party



PART FIVE

**WHAT
NOW**

The data is clear. The opportunity is massive.
What are we going to do about it?

IF YOU'RE A
DECISION
-MAKER

1

**TRACK
IT.**

Know your company's gender distribution at every level. You can't fix what you don't measure

2

**BUILD THE
NETWORK YOU
NEEDED.**

If you came from a startup mafia, pull others in. If you didn't, build one.

3

**CHECK YOUR
REFERENCES.**

When investors ask for references, whose names come first? Diversify that list.

IF YOU'RE AN **INVESTOR**

1

AUDIT YOUR PIPELINE.

What % of your deal flow is women-founded?
At what stage does it drop off?

2

TRACK YOUR CONVERSION.

What % of women-founded companies you meet get to term sheet?

3

LOOK AT YOUR PARTNERSHIP.

If 38% of VC analysts are women but only 16% of partners are, that's a you problem.



Building a fintech for women begins at the drawing board where the focus is on behaviour, empathy, and real life financial outcomes. While there is a lot of trial and error as there is no proven reference point, the growth may take time but is long lasting and sustainable as women are disciplined long term investors. Instead of the conventional lens of product selling, a woman centric Fintech builds on trust, education and simplicity aided by a set of Non Financial Services – leading to deeper engagement and organic growth.

Priti Rathi Gupta
Founder, Lxme



**WE STARTED THIS
REPORT WITH A
NUMBER:**

₹4

For every ₹100 raised by
founders from India's
most powerful networks,
only ₹4 goes to women.

**That's not a diversity problem.
That's a market failure.**

And market failures
get corrected — by
the people willing to
see them first.

INDIA HAS

**MORE WOMEN IN
STEM EDUCATION
THAN ALMOST
ANY COUNTRY
ON EARTH.**

**AND THEY'RE READY TO BUILD THE NEXT
WAVE OF TECHNOLOGY STARTUPS.**

We have the talent.
We have the ambition.
We have the market.

**SHARE THIS REPORT.
START A CONVERSATION.
CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS.**

The women are ready. Are we?

ABOUT

CXXO

CXXO is a Kalaari Capital initiative launched to address one of India's most persistent capital allocation failures: women-led ventures receive 0.3% of the country's venture capital, despite evidence that they generate stronger returns and build more resilient companies.

Since its founding, CXXO has deployed capital into women-led startups across sectors, produced original research on the structural gaps in India's funding ecosystem, and built one of the country's most active networks connecting women founders to capital, networks, and operators.

Our flagship platform, the CXXO NoCeiling Summit, brings together founders, investors, and ecosystem leaders to accelerate exactly that — the connections that turn into funded companies.

This report is a direct expression of that mission: name what isn't working, put the data in front of the people who can change it, and build differently.

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WHO WE ARE

CXXO is Kalaari Capital's initiative to find, fund, and back women founders at the earliest stages.

Alpha lives in the gaps between what the market believes and what is actually true. When capital concentrates around pattern-matched familiarity, it creates blind spots. Blind spots create inefficiency. And inefficiency, for those willing to see it, creates opportunity.

That is the CXXO thesis. We back founders who happen to be women — with the same rigour, the same expectations, and the same accountability as every founder we back. The difference is that we show up where most capital doesn't.

**The market is mispriced.
We intend to capture it.**

MEET OUR
AUTHORS

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CXXO PORTFOLIO



Neethu Mariam Joy | Nikkitha Shanker
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SAMOSA PARTY



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