

Outcome Report

Governance in Tech Programme at Pearl Initiative

ROUNDTABLE | GOVERNANCE AND INVESTOR READINESS FOR WOMEN-LED STARTUPS

Overview

In collaboration with the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa), the Pearl Initiative convened **11 women founders and ecosystem stakeholders** for an in-depth dialogue on the challenges and opportunities women encounter when preparing for investment. The discussion was designed as a safe space to exchange lived experiences, reflect on systemic and internal barriers, and identify the role that governance can play in strengthening investor confidence and entrepreneurial resilience.

Participants explored the realities of navigating credibility gaps, balancing multiple responsibilities, and addressing the internal and external biases that shape women's journeys as founders. The session underscored that governance, often seen narrowly as compliance, can in fact serve as a strategic enabler: providing structure in moments of uncertainty, ensuring continuity, and creating trust with investors, employees, and the broader ecosystem.

Key Takeaways

1. The Role of Governance in Structuring Early-Stage Ventures

Startups are inherently complex and often marked by ambiguity. Participants noted that governance frameworks, covering policies, roles, legal obligations, and accountability systems, can bring order to this environment. Good governance is not limited to adhering to external regulations; but also involves embedding clarity, resilience, and trust into the foundation of a venture. For women founders, this can be a particularly valuable tool to counter investor skepticism and establish credibility from the outset.

2. Addressing the Credibility Deficit for Women Founders

A recurring theme was the perception of women founders as less credible compared to their male counterparts. In some cases, investors defer judgment to male family members, undermining the autonomy and expertise of women entrepreneurs. This external bias compounds internal challenges such as imposter syndrome and "permission-seeking" tendencies. As a result, women often enter negotiations with less confidence, despite possessing the same, or greater, capabilities. The group stressed the need for intentional governance and professional development frameworks to counteract these dynamics.

3. Balancing Multiple Roles and Avoiding Founder Exhaustion

Women founders frequently carry multiple responsibilities across personal and professional domains. While this ability to “wear many hats” demonstrates resilience and adaptability, it also creates a risk of overextension and burnout. Governance can provide practical mechanisms to mitigate this risk, such as clearly defined decision-making structures, delegation processes, and accountability measures, ensuring that women founders are not solely burdened with the weight of sustaining their ventures.

4. Building Confidence, Resilience, and Preparedness

The discussion highlighted that investor readiness extends beyond financial acumen to encompass self-confidence, preparedness, and resilience. Participants emphasized that knowledge is a critical form of power, enabling women to navigate negotiations on equal terms. Access to professional networks, legal and financial literacy, and strong mentorship relationships were identified as enablers that allow women to build confidence and demonstrate readiness to investors. The importance of identifying the “right mentor” who is aligned with both values and strategic needs, was particularly underscored.

5. Challenging Bias and Reframing Ecosystem Responsibilities

Both internal bias (self-doubt and imposter syndrome) and external bias (societal assumptions and investor perceptions) were identified as key barriers. The group stressed that overcoming these cannot rest solely on individual women founders. Ecosystem actors including accelerators, investors, and policy institutions, must reframe their engagement by offering structural tools, governance capacity building, and peer-led learning models, rather than limiting support to token mentorship or pitch opportunities.

6. Governance as a Strategic Enabler of Trust and Continuity

Governance was recognized as a strategic lever that extends far beyond compliance. It can build investor trust, demonstrate professionalism, and create continuity that enables ventures to withstand scrutiny and scale sustainably. Importantly, participants highlighted that governance is a two-way street: just as founders must present themselves as governance-ready, they must also apply governance principles to vet investors, ensuring alignment and credibility in funding relationships.

7. Safety and Regional Context as Critical Considerations

Finally, participants raised the issue of safety as a distinctive challenge for women entrepreneurs in the region. Beyond business operations, safety and security remain part of the lived reality that influences women’s ability to engage fully in entrepreneurial ecosystems. A strong governance framework supported by ecosystem partners can mitigate

these risks by ensuring accountability, transparency, and reliable support structures for women founders.

Conclusion

The roundtable demonstrated that women's investor readiness cannot be addressed solely through technical training or pitch preparation. Instead, it requires a holistic approach: one that acknowledges systemic biases, supports women in building internal confidence and resilience, and embeds governance as a central tool for trust and sustainability. While the entrepreneurial journey will always entail uncertainty, governance provides women founders with the structures and strategies needed to navigate complexity, build credibility, and secure the confidence of investors and stakeholders alike.