



CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE 2025

Accelerate Action Today: Shaping the Future of Women in Tech

An AI Xecutive Council Discussion

White Paper

AIXC



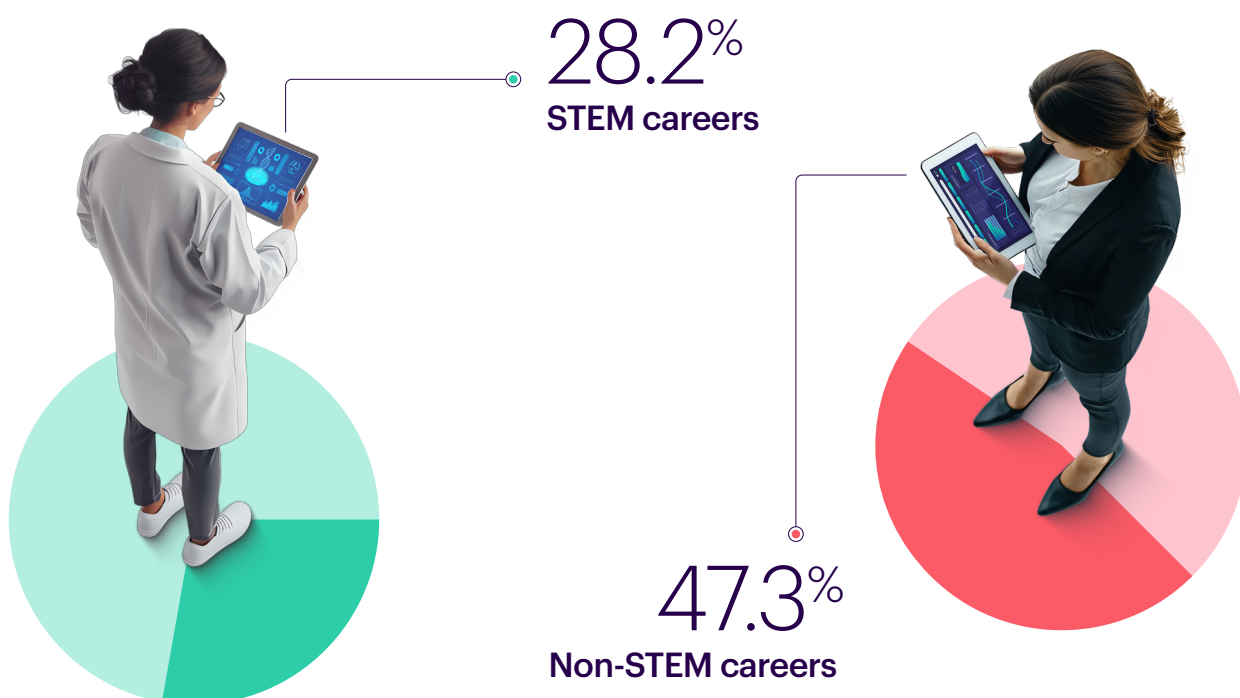
Introduction

Over the past few years, we have witnessed significant progress in increasing women's representation in STEM fields. Yet, despite these advancements, the gender gap remains stark, particularly in AI and data science. Today, we reflect on where we stand, how far we have come, and the work that still lies ahead.

According to the 2024 World Economic Forum report, women constitute just 28.2% of the STEM workforce, compared to 47.3% in non-STEM fields. This gap widens at leadership levels, where women hold just one-tenth of executive roles. Even more concerning, at the current pace, it will take 131 years to close the economic gender gap globally. In tech specifically, women represent only 27.6% of the workforce—an urgent reminder of why discussions like these are essential.

However, there are promising signs of progress. LinkedIn data shows that while women still have a smaller presence in AI than men, the concentration of female AI engineers has more than doubled since 2016. This signals that change is happening—but it must be accelerated.

This white paper builds upon insights from our recent International Women's Day virtual panel—a platform designed to amplify diverse voices, address real challenges, and explore actionable strategies for empowering women in AI & data science. By fostering meaningful conversations and building community-driven solutions, we can turn dialogue into action and drive lasting change in the industry.



Opening Remarks from Michelle

As someone who actively supports female founders in AI, what are some of the most common challenges you've seen women face in tech, and how do these challenges impact the AI growth and confidence?

Challenges Women Face in Tech: Breaking Barriers in AI & Entrepreneurship

Women in tech, especially in AI and startups, face persistent challenges that slow their progress. One of the biggest barriers is funding. In the U.S., only 2% of venture capital goes to female-founded companies, while 98% is directed to male-led ventures. This gap remains largely unchanged due to network-based funding models where investors prefer familiar success archetypes—often male. Without strong networks and referrals, many female founders struggle to secure funding.



Michelle Yi

Co-founder
Generationship

Confidence also plays a key role. Male founders often pitch early ideas with bold claims, while women tend to be more cautious. This cautious approach, while thoughtful, can limit opportunities. Women face more rejection in funding and business, and they often take it more personally, which impacts long-term confidence. However, confidence doesn't mean adopting a false narrative—it means trusting one's expertise and vision.

Beyond funding and confidence, access to business knowledge and resources is another challenge. Many women lack exposure to critical startup-building know-how, such as company formation, board management, and scaling strategies. While they excel in technical expertise, gaps in business logistics can slow growth.

To break these barriers, we need stronger networks, increased mentorship, and more investment in women-led startups. Women know how to build products and companies—they just need equal access to resources and opportunities.

Upskilling and access to curated learning programs are often cited as critical for success in tech. How important do you think structured learning opportunities are for women, and what role can organizations play in ensuring equitable access to them?

The Role of Mentorship and Learning Programs in Advancing Women in Tech.

Mentorship and structured learning programs are crucial for women in tech, particularly in early to mid-career stages. Research shows that curated one-on-one mentorship helps women navigate career transitions, from senior roles to executive leadership. While mentorship benefits everyone, women often lack organic access to these opportunities, making structured programs even more essential.

Organizations play a key role in ensuring equitable access to mentorship and learning. While many companies fund employee resource groups and training programs, the real impact comes when learning is embedded into daily work routines. Some companies, like Google, offer dedicated learning time, such as "15% time" or "Learning Fridays." However, many professionals— especially in AI-face constant pressure to be hyper-productive, leaving little room for skill-building.



Beyond networks and confidence, access to business knowledge and resources are major challenges faced by women.

To support women effectively, companies should:

- Prioritize learning as part of performance goals and promotion cycles.
- Offer structured mentorship programs at all career stages.
- Integrate learning into daily workflows, rather than expecting employees to learn outside of work hours.

By fostering a culture that values mentorship and continuous learning, organizations can help bridge the leadership gap and create more equitable career growth opportunities for women in tech.

Common Question

The challenges we faced when entering the workforce were different from those today. While some argue that barriers were tougher back then, expectations today come with their own complexities. **In your experience, what are the biggest challenges that still keep the gender ratio skewed in tech, especially at the leadership level?**

Praveena's Perspective

Breaking Barriers: Taking Ownership of Change

While gender bias in tech remains a challenge, change starts from within. Unconscious bias is deeply ingrained, and while training can help, true progress requires consistent effort from individuals and organizations. One major barrier is the lack of visible role models.

Women need to see others successfully balancing career, family, and leadership to believe they can do the same. Seeking inspiration from trailblazers like Indra Nooyi and successful peers can reinforce confidence.

However, change is not just about external factors—it also requires personal action. Women must challenge the status quo, advocate for themselves, and demand recognition for their contributions. Instead of waiting for others to create opportunities, they should proactively engage leaders, push for influence, and build strong professional networks.

Cultural change starts at home and in mentorship. Teaching sons to respect women and daughters to challenge norms can accelerate progress beyond the projected 131-year timeline for gender equity. Mentors play a crucial role in reshaping perspectives and empowering the next generation. Ultimately, while external biases exist, self-advocacy, mentorship, and cultural shifts will drive lasting change.



Praveena R

Senior Director,
Data Engineering & Analytics
Dollar General



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Ananya's Perspective

Driving Change with Confidence and Action

Achieving gender balance in tech starts with self-initiative. Women must be bold, take ownership, and drive change rather than waiting for others to lead. The biggest hurdle is getting started, but once action is taken, support follows—from both women and men. Building confidence and uplifting others is key to creating an inclusive industry.

A common challenge is self-doubt, especially in male-dominated spaces. Many women hesitate to step into higher roles, questioning their readiness. However, if they've been hired for a role, they belong there. Overcoming imposter syndrome is crucial—never self-reject an opportunity. Growth happens on the job, and the ability to learn and adapt ensures success.

Beyond personal growth, women must support and encourage others. Many women need just a small push to step forward. By mentoring, advocating, and creating an inclusive environment, women in leadership can help shift the gender imbalance in tech. Change is driven not just by policies but by individual actions that build a culture of confidence and empowerment.



Ananya Ghosh
Chowdhury

Senior Cloud Solution Architect
Microsoft



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Arun's Perspective

Breaking Bias and Taking Risks to Foster Inclusion

One of the biggest challenges in tech leadership is pattern-matching bias, where hiring decisions favor those who fit familiar profiles. This bias often stems from efficiency-driven thinking, where leaders opt for the fastest path to meeting deadlines, choosing candidates who have already done similar work. However, true growth and diversity come from taking risks on individuals who don't fit the expected mold.

Leaders must own the responsibility of breaking this cycle. It's not just about setting diversity goals—it's about actively creating opportunities for people with different backgrounds. Those who receive a chance often exceed expectations, proving that stepping beyond conventional hiring patterns leads to better long-term results.

A practical way to foster inclusion is through mentorship and visibility. When leaders actively mentor and uplift underrepresented talent, they attract more diverse teams naturally—not as a quota to fill, but because diverse perspectives lead to stronger, more innovative teams.

Ultimately, success comes from redefining talent selection, prioritizing potential over past experience, and taking deliberate steps to challenge unconscious biases. When leaders take risks on new talent, they create a culture of inclusion that benefits the entire industry.



Arun Giri

Head of Platform Engineering
Architecture & Lead Enterprise
Engineer
Union Pacific Railroad



True growth and diversity come from taking risks on individuals who don't fit the expected mold.

Ananya on Skilling & Representation in AI

Ananya shares her experience as one of the few women in the room during her early career. While some perceived her as too aggressive or fast-paced, she chose to ignore these biases rather than conform. She emphasizes the importance of self-belief, confidence, and perseverance for women in AI and technology leadership.

Reject Self-Doubt: Women should never self-reject or slow down due to societal biases. Hard work, confidence, and persistence are essential to success.



Women should recognize that if they are in the room, they belong there and should voice their insights with authority.

- **Confidence is Key:** Whether leading a startup, speaking at conferences, or driving change in an organization, confidence plays a critical role.
- **The Power of Role Models:** Witnessing strong female leaders in tech has reinforced her belief that success comes from resilience and passion.

Creating an Inclusive Space: Promoting the achievements of women in AI is crucial for inspiring the next generation.

- **Dream Bigger:** Many women settle for what they have instead of pushing further. Ananya encourages aiming high and challenging limitations.
- **Owning Your Seat at the Table:** Women should recognize that if they are in the room, they belong there and should voice their insights with authority.
- **Networking Matters:** Opportunities arise from unexpected places. Engaging with a broad network strengthens professional growth.
- **Trusting Instincts:** Women possess strong instincts and should trust them when making career decisions.

Seek and Provide Mentorship: Guidance from mentors, both male and female, is invaluable. Equally, women should uplift and mentor others entering the field.

- **Embracing Rejection:** Rejection is not failure but a learning opportunity. Job searches, interviews, and startup pitches are all part of growth.
- **Take Risks and Start Now:** Whether launching a startup or pursuing leadership roles, waiting for the perfect moment is a mistake—begin now and refine along the way.

Praveena on Leadership & Empathy

Praveena, you've often spoken about empathy as a critical leadership trait in the past. It is widely recognized as a strength among women leaders, yet not always valued enough in decision-making roles. How can organizations foster a culture that embraces empathetic leadership, and why is this key to building a more inclusive workplace?

Empathy is a crucial yet often overlooked trait in leadership. Praveena emphasizes that society suffers from an empathy deficit, which organizations must address through leadership training, role modeling, and fostering inclusive work environments.



Empathy is the biggest deficit in the society.

Empathy as a Leadership Skill

- Leaders should practice stepping into others' shoes to understand different perspectives before making decisions.
- Unconscious bias can lead to women leaders facing resistance, but strong leadership should counteract these biases.

Developing Empathy in Organizations

- Leadership Development Programs: Empathy should be integrated into training to build more understanding leaders.
- Role Models: Highlighting empathetic leaders inspires others to adopt similar approaches.
- Diversity and Inclusion: Bringing together people from different backgrounds enhances innovation and decision-making.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Secure and anonymous feedback systems help leaders improve their empathetic skills.
- Active Listening: Leaders must prioritize listening before suggesting solutions, as problems may have different contexts for different individuals.

The Benefits of Empathy in Leadership

- Psychological Safety: Employees perform better when they feel safe and supported.
- Collaboration & Innovation: Diverse perspectives lead to creative solutions and business success.
- Employee Retention & Engagement: An empathetic work culture results in loyal and motivated employees.
- Enhanced Productivity: Employees who trust their leaders work more effectively and contribute meaningfully.

Addressing Unconscious Bias

- It's important to differentiate constructive challenges from bias-driven resistance.
- Recognizing unconscious bias ensures a fair and inclusive work environment.

Empathy is not just a soft skill but a necessity for effective leadership. By fostering an empathetic culture, organizations can create a positive, innovative, and high-performing workplace. Leaders must invest in active listening, inclusion, and role modeling to build teams that thrive.

Arun on Role of Male Allies & Leadership Responsibility

Arun, we are fortunate to have male allies like yourself who don't just support diversity in words but also take action. Is this a conscious effort on your part, and what advice would you give to other male leaders on creating an equitable and inclusive workplace?

Part of it is a conscious effort, but it also needs to become a programmatic behavior— something ingrained rather than just an explicit goal. Inclusion shouldn't just be about meeting diversity targets; it should be a natural part of leadership.



Allow people to bring their whole self to the table. It is about making reasonable accommodations without making them feel singled out.

Inclusion Should Be a Natural Behavior, Not Just a Goal

- While diversity efforts can be intentional, true inclusion should become second nature.
- It's not about meeting a quota but about fostering an environment where everyone feels valued.

Allow People to Bring Their Whole Selves to Work

- Leaders must create spaces where employees feel comfortable being themselves.
- This means making reasonable accommodations based on personal circumstances (e.g., health condition, new parents) without making them feel singled out.

Courageous Leadership is Key

- Policies exist, but real change happens when leaders have the courage to act on them.
- Ensuring inclusivity may sometimes be misinterpreted as favoritism, but leaders must stand firm in doing what's right.

Lead by Example and Learn from Role Models

- Arun's leadership approach was shaped by a woman leader who encouraged him to be himself.
- Observing and learning from inclusive leaders helps foster long-term behavioral change.

Recognize and Support Diverse Strengths

- Not everyone fits a traditional mold, and great leaders recognize unique strengths in their teams.
- Encouraging diverse thought and non-traditional approaches leads to innovation.

Pay It Forward

- Inclusion is a continuous process of learning and passing on good leadership behaviors.
- Leaders should create environments where being different is not just accepted but celebrated.

Building an Inclusive Culture is a Leadership Responsibility

- Employees should not have to struggle for inclusion—it's on leaders to create that space.
- The more leaders embrace and normalize diversity, the more it becomes an integral part of workplace culture.

Claus on Impact of Diversity through Business Outcomes

Claus, we often hear that diverse teams lead to better innovation and more effective business outcomes. Can you share examples from your own experiences where diverse teams made a significant impact, and what policies or practices can help accelerate this shift in the tech industry?

Diversity Drives Innovation

- Diverse teams lead to better business outcomes by bringing unique perspectives.
- Hiring people with different backgrounds and skills fosters breakthrough innovations, like his team's pioneering work in unsupervised learning AI models.



Never Hire People Who Think & Look Like You

- True diversity of thought happens when teams include individuals who challenge each other.
- It's okay to feel uncomfortable disagreement can lead to stronger, more creative solutions.

Lead by Actions, Not Words

- Leadership isn't about titles—it's about competence and setting an example.
- The military background reinforced the learning that people follow those who understand and engage with real challenges on the ground.

Get Hands-On with Your Team's Work

- Leaders should immerse themselves in frontline experiences.
- Whether it's training alongside technical teams or understanding their daily struggles, leaders earn trust by demonstrating real knowledge.

Surround Yourself with People Smarter Than You

- Strong leaders embrace hiring individuals who are more knowledgeable in specific areas.
- This leads to better decision-making and a more dynamic team environment.

Use a Decentralized Leadership Model (Holacracy)

- Empower teams by removing rigid hierarchies.
- Set clear boundaries and expectations while fostering collaboration.

Limit unnecessary meetings—only meet when needed and ensure every interaction has a purpose.

Get Hands-On with Your Team's Work

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Hiring people with different backgrounds and skills fosters breakthrough innovations.

Make Time for Your Team

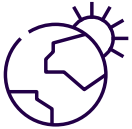
- The worst thing a leader can do is be unavailable.
- Structuring work effectively frees up time for meaningful conversations and support.

Embrace Change & Continuous Learning

- Leaders who resist new ways of working risk falling behind.
- Those who embrace flexibility and new approaches grow faster in their careers.

Conclusion

Our discussion highlighted the importance of inclusive leadership, diverse teams, and leading by action. Each panelist shared valuable insights on fostering diversity, equity, and innovation in the workplace.



Praveena: Driving Systemic Change

Leadership should focus on measurable actions, not just discussions.

Creating equitable workplaces requires intentional efforts in hiring, mentorship, and workplace culture.



Arun: The Role of Male Allies

Leaders must have the courage to act and make reasonable accommodations to support diverse teams.

Inclusion is about allowing people to bring their whole selves to work without fear of bias.



Ananya: Breaking Barriers for Women in Leadership

Women need strong mentorship, sponsorship, and an inclusive environment to thrive.

Organizations must move beyond policies and actively create opportunities for women to rise.



Claus: Diversity Fuels Innovation

Hiring diverse perspectives leads to better business outcomes and stronger teams.

Leaders should lead by action, immerse themselves in their team's work, and embrace non-traditional leadership models like Holacracy.

Closing Notes

Inclusion is a leadership responsibility. The most successful leaders create environments where everyone feels valued, heard, and empowered to contribute. True progress happens when diversity is not just encouraged but ingrained in the company's DNA, shaping hiring decisions, leadership development, and everyday interactions.

Building a truly inclusive workplace means challenging biases, making room for diverse voices, and fostering a culture of trust and equity. It's about taking bold actions—not just in policies but in daily leadership behaviors—that break barriers, open doors, and create opportunities for all. When leaders commit to this mindset, they don't just build better teams; they drive stronger innovation, collaboration, and business success.

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Leveraging collective
knowledge to lead AI Innovation

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