

DRIVING CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF WOMEN IMPACT ENTREPRENEURS

Globally, women impact entrepreneurs are a powerful force for social, environmental, and economic change. The Cartier Women’s Initiative is an annual international entrepreneurship program designed to drive change by empowering these entrepreneurs with financial, social, and human capital support. The program targets women impact entrepreneurs who find themselves in the “missing middle”, having secured traction with their business and impact model, but unable to scale to a larger size or achieve greater impact due to a fundamental disparity between their specific needs and available funding. These impact businesses are often either too big for microfinance, too small or high-risk for traditional bank loans at this early stage, or have a different growth, return, and exit potential than one sought by venture capitalists.

Empowering financially sustainable and growth-oriented women-led impact businesses

Women-owned and women-led businesses applying to the Regional Awards category must be early-stage, impact-driven (contributing to at least one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals), for-profit, generating revenue for at least one year, having secured no more than US\$2 million in dilutive funding. Meanwhile, those applying to the Science & Technology Pioneer Award, must be for-profit and aiming to create impact via “deep tech”, introducing a new technology or engineering process with at least a proof of concept or a prototype that is either ready or under development.

Every year, the Cartier Women’s Initiative receives nearly a thousand applications, with over 550¹ meeting the eligibility criteria, which are designed to identify financially sustainable and growth-oriented women-led impact businesses. Given the regional distribution of applicants from 2023 and 2024, the Cartier Women’s Initiative is actively seeking to increase the number of eligible applications from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East. Nonetheless, the Cartier Women’s Initiative applicant pool offers a unique perspective on the diverse landscape of women’s impact entrepreneurship, encompassing over 90 locations globally.

In the following article, we will examine eligible applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Regional Awards and Science & Technology Pioneer Award to uncover insights about women impact entrepreneurs.

Examining eligible applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Regional Awards

1. Wide variety of business sectors:

¹Over 400 applications for the Regional Awards category and over 150 applications for the Science and Technology Pioneer Category

Applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Regional Awards are running impact-businesses across a wide variety of sectors. The most commonly represented sectors are healthcare, education and training, agriculture and food, consumer products and services, and fashion, design and textiles.

2. Prevalence of solo-woman and all-women founding teams:

According to the [Global Accelerator Learning Initiative \(GALI\)](#)² data, the gender composition of founding teams applying to accelerators is as follows: 52% all-men, 35% mixed-gender, and 13% all-women. Interestingly, the Cartier Women’s Initiative sees a similar proportion of mixed-gender teams among its Regional Awards applicants (35% and 34% for 2023 and 2024 editions, respectively). The remaining two-thirds of applicants are split into women solo founders (approximately 40%) and all-women founding teams (about 25%).

3. Diversified revenue streams:

Many applicants are combining different business models. Across both 2023 and 2024 Regional Award editions, over 60% of applicants are using B2B, nearly 7 in 10 are using B2C and 10% are using B2G. Of these, 30% are exclusively serving individual customers and 25% are only catering to other businesses.

4. Diversified and resilient fundraising in the face of economic adversity:

Over 60% of women impact entrepreneurs applying to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Regional Awards secured grants to finance their businesses. Additionally, more than a third received equity or debt at the time of application. At the same time, one in six 2023 applicants and one in five 2024 applicants had bootstrapped their impact business, with higher rates of bootstrapping in Asia. Despite facing challenging economic conditions and various barriers, a large proportion of women impact entrepreneurs have secured external funding by the time they applied. A detailed summary of the amounts they secured is presented in the table below.

	Number of Applications	Average Amount (USD)	Median Amount (USD)
Grant	276	\$118,000	\$40,000
Equity	163	\$411,000	\$221,000
Debt	164	\$158,000	\$58,000
Grant	270	\$153,000	\$43,000
Equity	151	\$449,000	\$244,000
Debt	153	\$181,000	\$66,000

² A. Davidson & V. Hume, “Accelerating Women Led Startups: A Knowledge Brief by the Global Accelerator Learning Initiative”, March 2020, https://www.galidata.org/assets/report/pdf/accelerating_women_led_startups_final.pdf

5. Tailored solutions for community needs:

An analysis by national income level shows that women impact entrepreneurs are addressing the pressing challenges in their communities. Across all geographies, Good Health and Well-being (SDG3) was consistently the top goal in both application cycles. Gender Equality (SDG 5) was also among the top goals across all regions. In high income countries, the other top propriety was Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG12). Whilst in upper middle-income countries, Quality Education (SDG4) and Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG8) were also prevalent. And in lower middle- and low-income countries women impact entrepreneurs tended to focus on No Poverty (SDG1), Quality Education (SDG4), and Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG8).

Examining eligible applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Science & Technology Pioneer Award

1. Top business sectors:

Top sectors for the Science & Technology Pioneer Award in 2023 and 2024 are digital health and medical devices, followed by cleantech, environment and energy, medical biotech and pharmaceuticals - notably in 2024 - and food and agriculture.

2. Prevalence of mixed-gender co-founder teams:

The majority of applicants for the Science & Technology Pioneer Award come from mixed-gender co-founder teams. However, approximately one in five women has co-founded her deep tech impact business exclusively with other women. Roughly one in five is a solo founder.

3. B2B-focused revenue streams:

Women impact entrepreneurs applying to the Science & Technology Pioneer Award are most likely to adopt a B2B business models. Applicants for the 2023 edition had relatively more diversified revenue streams with 30% reporting B2C business models, an equal proportion applying B2G, and 18% adopting platform business models. Fewer 2024 edition applicants had B2C (18%), B2G (4%) and platform (13%) business models.

4. Diversified and resilient fundraising with a prominence of grants and equity:

In 2023 and 2024, between 75% and 80% of women impact entrepreneurs who applied to the Science & Technology Pioneer Award received grants, and 56% to 71% had raised equity. Additionally, a very small portion of these women impact entrepreneurs reported bootstrapping their business at the time of application, and a sizeable minority had already taken on debt financing. A detailed summary of the amounts they received by the time of application is presented in the table below:

	Number of Applications	Average Amount (USD)	Median Amount (USD)
Grant	128	\$1,039,000	\$316,000
Equity	113	\$2,352,000	\$652,000
Debt	52	\$542,000	\$130,000
Grant	107	\$575,000	\$200,000
Equity	80	\$3,515,000	\$497,000
Debt	29	\$356,000	\$67,000

5. Innovative solutions for global challenges:

Women deep-tech impact entrepreneurs are solving global challenges. Their impact businesses focus, in order of popularity, on Good Health and Well-being (SDG3), Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG9), Climate Action (SDG13), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG12), and Zero Hunger (SDG2). A large majority of their innovations involve patentable technologies, and 21% to 32% of them had already secured at least one patent within 5 years of operation.

Creating employment and promoting gender diversity

Despite their obvious particularities, a noteworthy similarity between applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of Regional Awards and Science & Technology Pioneer Award is that an overwhelming majority - over 80% - consistently created employment, generating an average of 9 to 10 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs. Moreover, the majority of these positions are filled by women, highlighting that women-led impact businesses are not only generating jobs across various sectors but are also promoting female employment, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

In conclusion, examining eligible applicants to the 2023 and 2024 editions of the Cartier Women's Initiative awards provides a glimpse into the landscape of women impact entrepreneurs, demonstrating their remarkable achievements and potential. These entrepreneurs are not only pioneering sustainable business practices and innovations, but also playing a pivotal role in addressing global challenges. Their success is a testament to the transformative power of gender equity in fostering more resilient and equitable societies. Looking forward, we hope that more investors, policymakers, corporations, and consumers will make the choice of supporting these women impact entrepreneurs, joining effort to close the "missing middle".