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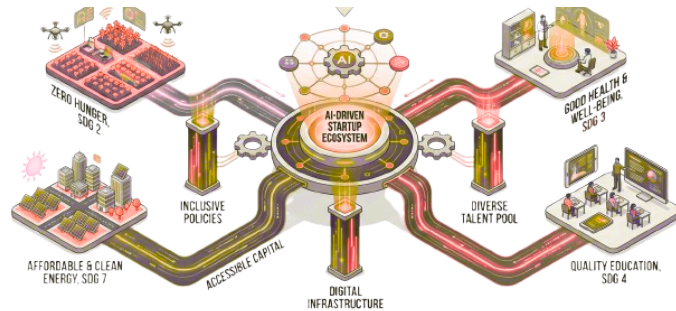


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CATALYZING INCLUSIVE GROWTH THROUGH INNOVATION STRENGTHENING THE STARTUP ECOSYSTEM FOR AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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on

**CATALYZING INCLUSIVE GROWTH THROUGH INNOVATION:
STRENGTHENING THE STARTUP ECOSYSTEM FOR AI-DRIVEN
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Catalyzing Inclusive Growth Through Innovation: Strengthening The Startup Ecosystem For AI -Driven and Sustainable Development

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WOMEN LEADING THE FUTURE: DRIVING INCLUSIVE GROWTH THROUGH INNOVATION AND AI

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of women entrepreneurs in driving inclusive growth through innovation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) using primary data collected from women-led startups and entrepreneurs. A structured survey method was adopted to capture perceptions, challenges, opportunities, and the impact of AI on business growth and inclusion. Data were collected from 150 women entrepreneurs across technology, social enterprise, fintech, edtech, Agri tech, and healthcare sectors. The findings reveal that women-led enterprises significantly contribute to inclusive growth through employment generation, digital inclusion, and socially oriented innovation. AI adoption is positively associated with business scalability, market access, and service delivery. However, barriers such as limited funding, digital skill gaps, and gender bias remain significant. The study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of women in building inclusive, AI-driven innovation ecosystems and offers policy and strategic recommendations for strengthening women-led entrepreneurial development.

Keywords: Women-Led startups- AI – Innovation- Sustainable Development-Inclusive Growth

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive growth has emerged as a critical goal in the context of rapid technological advancement, widening economic inequalities, and uneven access to innovation opportunities. Innovation and entrepreneurship are key drivers of economic development; however, their benefits often remain concentrated among a limited segment of society. Women's participation in entrepreneurship and innovation is increasingly recognized as essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable growth, as women-led enterprises tend to integrate economic objectives with social impact, employment generation, and community development. The growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents new opportunities to enhance productivity, scalability, and service delivery across sectors such as healthcare, education, finance, and agriculture. Women entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to lead

ethical, human-centered, and inclusive AI-driven innovations. Despite this potential, women remain underrepresented in AI-intensive startup ecosystems and face barriers related to finance, skills, and institutional support. This study examines the role of women-led startups in driving inclusive growth through innovation and AI, using primary data to provide empirical insights into their contributions and challenges.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women Entrepreneurship and Inclusive Growth

Kabeer (2012) emphasized that women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in achieving inclusive growth by expanding labor market participation and enterprise development. The study highlights that women-led enterprises often prioritize social outcomes alongside economic objectives, making them key contributors to inclusive development. The OECD (2022) reported that women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to job creation and innovation, yet face persistent digital and financial exclusion. The report stresses the need for gender-responsive innovation ecosystems to bridge the digital gender divide and promote inclusive growth. Brush, Greene, Balachandra, and Davis (2018) found that gender bias in entrepreneurial finance restricts women's access to venture capital, limiting the scalability of women-led startups. Their research underscores the importance of redesigning entrepreneurial ecosystems to support women innovators.

Innovation, AI, and Economic Inclusion

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2017) argued that digital technologies and AI can act as powerful engines of economic growth, but without inclusive frameworks, they risk exacerbating inequality. Their work highlights the importance of inclusive innovation policies to ensure equitable access to technological benefits. Floridi et al. (2018) proposed an ethical AI framework emphasizing fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. The authors argue that diverse leadership, including women's participation in AI design and governance, is essential to prevent algorithmic bias and promote socially beneficial AI systems. UNESCO (2022) reported that women are underrepresented in AI research, development, and leadership roles, contributing to gender bias in AI systems. The report advocates for increasing women's participation in AI education and innovation to support inclusive digital transformation.

Women Leadership, Innovation Ecosystems, and AI

UN Women (2023) highlighted that women's leadership in digital innovation is critical for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. The report notes that women-led

digital enterprises are more likely to address social challenges such as healthcare access, education, and financial inclusion. World Economic Forum (2022) emphasized that gender-inclusive innovation ecosystems enhance economic resilience and sustainability. The report links women's leadership in technology and innovation with improved governance, ethical AI adoption, and inclusive growth outcomes. A study by Foss, Henry, Ahl, and Mikalsen (2019) found that institutional barriers and gendered norms continue to shape women's entrepreneurial experiences in innovation-driven sectors. The authors recommend targeted policy interventions, mentorship, and ecosystem support for women-led startups.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Inclusive growth has emerged as a critical development goal in the context of rising economic inequality, digital divides, and uneven access to technological advancements. While innovation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have the potential to accelerate economic growth and social inclusion, their benefits are not equitably distributed. Women, particularly women entrepreneurs and innovators, remain significantly underrepresented in AI-driven startup ecosystems, leadership positions, access to finance, and advanced digital skill development. Despite increasing policy attention toward women entrepreneurship, empirical evidence suggests that women-led startups face systemic barriers such as limited access to venture capital, gender bias in technology sectors, inadequate AI infrastructure, and insufficient inclusion in innovation networks. These challenges restrict women's ability to fully leverage innovation and AI for business growth and inclusive development. Moreover, existing research predominantly relies on secondary data or macro-level indicators, offering limited insights into the lived experiences, innovation practices, and AI adoption patterns of women entrepreneurs. There is a clear research gap in primary data-based empirical studies that examine how women-led innovation and AI adoption contribute to inclusive growth outcomes such as employment generation, digital inclusion, and community development. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of empirical, primary data-driven understanding of the role of women entrepreneurs in driving inclusive growth through innovation and AI, and the persistent structural barriers limiting their participation in AI-enabled startup ecosystems. Addressing this problem is essential for designing effective policies, inclusive innovation frameworks, and sustainable development strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the role of women-led startups in promoting inclusive growth
- To find out AI adoption among women entrepreneurs
- To identify challenges faced by women in AI-driven innovation
- To suggest policy and ecosystem strategies based on findings

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on primary data. The data is collected through a well structured questionnaire. A sample of 150 women entrepreneurs from Coimbatore District has been selected by adopting purposive sampling method. Simple Percentage has been used to analyze the data.

Findings

To present the primary data more systematically, tables have been used for analysis and interpretation. The tables are based on responses collected from 150 women entrepreneurs.

(i) Demographic Profile of Women Entrepreneurs

Table: 1

Demographic Profile of Women Entrepreneurs

Demographic Profile	Number of Respondents(N=150)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20- 30 years	42	28
31-40 years	65	43
41-50 Years	31	21
Above 50 Years	12	8
Education Qualification		
Under Graduate	37	25
Post Graduate	68	45
Professional	36	24
Others	9	6

From the above table it is found that most 65(43%) of women entrepreneurs belong to 31-40 years age group, followed by 32(28%) in the 20-30 years category. It is also found that majority of the women respondents 68(45%) have post graduate qualification, while 37(25%) have under graduate qualification and 36(25%) were professionals. Education was positive and support innovation and AI integration in business.

(ii) Sector-wise Distribution of Women Led Startups

Table: 2

Sector-wise Distribution of Women Led Startups

Sector	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Fin Tech	21	14
EdTech	24	16
Technology/IT	39	26
HealthTech	27	18
AgriTech	18	12
Social Enterprise	21	14
Total	150	100

From the table-2 it is revealed that women entrepreneurs are actively engaged in technology driven and knowledge-intensive sectors. Majority of the entrepreneurs startups are in Technology/IT sectors, followed by HealthTech, EdTech, Fin Tech and Social Enterprise. This highlights the shift of women entrepreneurs towards innovation-oriented and AI enabled sectors indicating their growing role in shaping future-ready and inclusive startup ecosystem.

(iii) Adoption of AI in Business Operations

Table: 3

Adoption of AI

AI Adoption	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Engagement of Customer	48	32
Automation of Business	29	19
Supply Chain	13	9
Marketing	18	12
Data analytics	42	28
Total	150	100

It is found that most of the women entrepreneurs primarily used AI for customer engagement followed by data analytics, business automation and marketing. Lower adoption in supply chain indicates the need for advanced AI capacity building for women-led business.

(iv) Impact of AI in Business Growth

Table: 4

Impact of AI in Business Growth

Impact of AI	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Market Access	67	21	12
Delivery of Service	64	22	14
Growth of Revenue	59	26	15
Generation of Employment	62	23	15
Business Expansion Capacity	71	18	11

The findings reveal that majority of the women entrepreneurs agree that AI has improved business expansion capacity, market access, delivery of service, generation of employment and growth of revenue. The findings indicate that AI acts as a growth enabler for women-led startups,

(v) Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Table: 5

Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Challenges	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Lack of Fund	42	28
Lack of Digital Skills	36	24
Gender Bias	28	19
Lack of AI Infrastructure	25	17
Low of Policy Awareness	19	12
Total	150	100

From the above table it is observed that lack of fund 28% were identified as the most significant challenge, followed by digital skill gaps 36%, gender bias 28%, lack of AI infrastructure 25% and low policy awareness 19% further restrict women's participation in AI-driven innovation ecosystems.

Discussion

Primary data analysis indicates that women-led startups contribute significantly to inclusive growth through employment generation, digital inclusion, and socially driven innovation. AI adoption strengthens business performance, scalability, and outreach, making women entrepreneurs key drivers of inclusive innovation ecosystems. However, structural barriers continue to restrict full participation in AI innovation spaces.

Suggestions

- ❖ Dedicated AI funding schemes for women entrepreneurs
- ❖ National AI skill development programs for women
- ❖ Women-focused AI incubators and accelerators
- ❖ Gender-inclusive digital infrastructure
- ❖ Ethical and inclusive AI policy frameworks
- ❖ Public–private partnerships for women-led innovation

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study highlight that women entrepreneurs play a significant role in promoting inclusive growth through innovation and the adoption of AI-based technologies. Women-led startups contribute not only to business growth and employment generation but also to digital inclusion, community development, and gender empowerment. The analysis reveals that AI adoption enhances business scalability, market access, and service delivery, reinforcing the importance of technology as a catalyst for inclusive development when guided by women’s leadership. However, the study also identifies persistent challenges such as limited access to funding, digital skill gaps, gender bias, and inadequate AI infrastructure, which constrain the full potential of women-led innovation. Addressing these barriers requires gender-responsive policies, targeted financial support, skill development initiatives, and inclusive innovation ecosystems. Strengthening women’s leadership in AI-driven entrepreneurship is essential for achieving equitable, sustainable, and inclusive growth in the future.

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