

WOMEN IN FINANCIAL INNOVATION

20 JUNE 2018

On 20 June, the Finance Innovation Lab brought together thirty female leaders from different parts of the financial innovation ecosystem, including finance professionals, start-up founders and campaigners, to begin an inquiry into the barriers facing women leading purposeful innovation in finance. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule.

1. Why we came together

The experience of women in financial innovation is challenging. Statistics paint part of the picture: just [30% of the fintech workforce is female](#), the [average gender pay gap in banks and building societies is 35%](#), and a [meagre 2% of VC funding goes to female-founded companies](#).

While the Lab has had the opportunity to work with many brilliant and talented women, the number of women participating in our programmes is unacceptably low too (about 1 in 3 are female). As part of the Lab's commitment to address this, we convened this meeting to uncover the common barriers and challenges women face, understand their root causes, and identify what changes could empower all women working in financial innovation. In particular, we were looking for ideas of how to make our programmes as inclusive as possible, and what change to advocate for in the wider sector.

2. The barriers

Through the personal stories and experiences shared at the meeting, a number of common challenges were uncovered, as well as useful insights about their nature. In particular:

- Barriers are both internal and external, and often there is an intimate connection between the two – such as the media portrayal of women leading to feelings of low confidence
- Many of these barriers are subtle or hidden, such as organisational culture and the language used to speak about, for and to women – making them hard to pinpoint and address
- The barriers are complex and often related to other aspects of our selves, personalities and lives.
- Key external barriers include:
 - The portrayal of women in the media and the attitudes this creates
 - The way 'feminine characteristics' are defined and perceived across society
 - Language used to describe and speak to women
 - Culture and behaviour within organisations, including the glass ceiling, sexist jokes and harassment
 - A lack of female investors, leading to gender dynamics in pitching, where women are disadvantaged by unconscious bias and preferred pitching styles
 - A myth that there are 'no women' in or suitable for work in the field, which is used as an excuse for poor gender diversity
- Key internal barriers include:
 - Low confidence
 - Excessive modesty
 - Feeling the need to mould ourselves or conform to the status quo of what leadership looks like or how success is defined
 - Competitiveness between women or not supporting one another.

3. The enablers

Despite the multiple barriers, participants also identified a number of enablers that support them to overcome challenges.

- Key external enablers identified included:
 - Networks of support (including mentors, female and male allies, colleagues, friends and family)
 - Incubators exclusively for or focused on women, which encourage women into the space and provide support for the key challenges that they face
 - Positive female role models for new forms of leadership
 - Blogs and podcasts which showcase inspiring women and discuss women's issues
 - Quotas to ensure diverse recruitment and hiring – especially at senior levels.
- Key internal enablers identified included:
 - EQ contributing to strong communication skills, relationship management and resilience
 - Capacity to listen and read people, making collaboration and open conversations more accessible
 - Positive affirmations and mindfulness as tools for self-care and motivation
 - Passion for the work and self-inspiration as drivers to succeed.

4. Next steps

At the end of the evening, we asked each participant to suggest one thing the world could do, and one thing the Lab could do, to support women in financial innovation. Here are some of the highlights...

- What the world could do to support women in financial innovation:
 - Take women seriously
 - Champion female role models at all levels
 - Use hiring processes that minimise gender bias
 - Provide women with financial education from a young age
 - Support people to call-out bad behaviour in and beyond the work place, including sexist comments, jokes and harassment.
- What the Lab could do support women in financial innovation:
 - Create a peer support network
 - Set up a mentoring scheme
 - Celebrate brilliant women and their innovative approaches in communications
 - Organise trainings and skill-shares, including helping women to develop confidence and navigate political situations at work
 - Run more events, including specifically for women of colour and male allies, and in partnership with financial institutions and HR teams.

The Lab team is incorporating the insights from the event as we develop Lab Fellowship 2018 and our Community of Practice. We will report back fully on next steps at a second Women in Financial Innovation event on Thursday 30 August. If you have questions, comments or suggestions please contact Naomi Alexander Naidoo at naomi@financeinnovationlab.org.