Request for Application (RFA)
on
Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship

Under Grand Challenges India
Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC)
(A Government of India Enterprise)

Jointly supported by
Department of Biotechnology (DBT),
Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India
&
Gates Foundation

Call Opens	December 18, 2025
Closure of Submission	January 23, 2026, 4 PM

Introduction

The Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India, and the Gates Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2012, where both parties agreed to collaborate on scientific and technological research to alleviate some of the world's most critical global health and development issues, for the benefit of the people of India and other developing countries. Grand Challenges India (GCI), a Program Management Unit of this joint-partnership housed at Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), New Delhi, seeks to identify opportunities to support studies focused on early-stage research and product development to tackle health and developmental issues with special emphasis on innovative, impactful research in existing strategies, sought on the broader global health and developmental challenges.

India boasts the largest number of STEM graduates globally, reflecting the country's robust academic capacity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Notably, a significant proportion of these graduates are women. However, this promising educational trend is not mirrored in workforce participation. According to Global Gender Gap Report 2023 by the World Economic Forum, women make up only 27 percent of India's STEM workforce. This under representation highlights a substantial and underutilized segment of human capital. Despite equal or near-equal entry into STEM education, women are significantly more likely to exit the field or shift to non-STEM career paths as they progress in their professional journeys. This attrition is especially stark at senior levels: at C-suite level, it's just 19 percent women[1].

Research supports that having a gender-diverse leadership team positively impacts organizational performance. Female ownership in firms significantly increases the likelihood of innovation, emphasising the role of women leaders in driving business growth and competitiveness.[2] A BMJ study[3] suggests that women often employ transformational and democratic leadership styles, which contribute to these positive outcomes. Empowering women in leadership roles serves to challenge traditional gender biases, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society that benefits all.

Grand Challenges India - BIRAC in collaboration with WomenLift Health India, proposes to launch a call on Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship - a structured leadership development programme targeting mid-career women in STEM. This programme seeks to equip participants with the necessary tools, mentorship, and institutional support to navigate systemic challenges and assume leadership roles in India's innovation ecosystem. Here, we invite applications to build a cohort which is designed for women entrepreneurs leading

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[1] Companies don't want mid-career women. That's a missing of middle in corporate India. The Print. 27 May, 2025.
[2] Biswas, S. She Innovates-Female owner and firm innovation in India. 20 September, 2021
https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2109.09515
[3] Kalbarczyk, A. et al. A scoping review on the impact of women's global leadership: evidence to inform health leadership. BMJ Global Health. 4 February, 2025

innovations in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Its overarching goal is to amplify the influence and authority of women in STEM and stimulate a systemic change towards gender equality in leadership roles.

2. Background

India has observed a progressive trend in the participation of women in STEM disciplines at the tertiary education level. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21, women constitute approximately 43.2 percent of enrolments across undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programmes in STEM fields. This representation surpasses global averages and reflects ongoing efforts to enhance gender diversity in higher education. Despite these advancements, the transition of women from academic settings to professional roles in STEM research, innovation, and entrepreneurship remains limited.

While women account for a substantial proportion of STEM graduates, their participation in entrepreneurial ventures is comparatively low. Data from the Reserve Bank of India indicates that only 5.9 percent of startups are founded exclusively by women, whereas 55.5 percent are founded solely by men.[4] Several systemic barriers contribute to this disparity, including entrenched gender stereotypes, limited access to early-stage funding, and a lack of mentorship opportunities. The IWWAGE report, 'Women in STEM: Challenges and Opportunities in India,' highlights that women in STEM-intensive sectors often face disproportionate scrutiny, receive lower valuations as entrepreneurs of their start-ups, and encounter scepticism regarding their leadership capabilities.

Pursuing this objective, Grand Challenges India in partnership with Womenlift Health launched a programme on Women Leadership in STEM in 2023 to empower women into leadership positions. The inaugural cohort of the Women Leadership in STEM programme has successfully completed a structured, year-long leadership journey. The participants were selected through a competitive process and received structured support in the form of leadership training modules, coaching, mentorship, and peer-to-peer engagement. The experiences and high potential leadership projects of the cohort members serve as an encouraging model for advancing gender-equitable leadership in India's STEM ecosystem and provide a strong foundation upon which the upcoming cohorts can be built. The second call under this program focuses only on women entrepreneurs.

This initiative is designed to empower women entrepreneurs to expand their leadership sphere and realise their potential to:

1. Confidently lead and scale their entrepreneurial or innovation-driven ventures;
2. Build resilient, sustainable businesses that generate impact and create opportunities for other women in STEM;

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[4] Decoding government support to women entrepreneurs in India, October 2022

3. Strengthen networks across industry, academia, investors, and ecosystem enablers to accelerate women-led innovation.

3. Program Overview

Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship is a leadership development program for women entrepreneurs in STEM. Through this program, 30 mid-career women entrepreneurs leading STEM innovations would be selected for a year-long journey which will be executed in a hybrid manner including virtual and in-person residencies. Workshops will be conducted which would provide tools and frameworks for expanding and developing leadership styles and creating an inclusive and diverse network to foster a strong sense of belonging and also enhance their voice, presence, and influence.

This call is for women entrepreneurs who are founders or co-founders of their own STEM start-ups or organizations. This programme has been designed as a part-time year long program that can be accommodated alongside a fulltime position/engagement.

- Through this program, a cohort of 30 women entrepreneurs will be selected. They will interact via virtual sessions, coaching, mentoring touchpoints through the course of 12 months.
- The virtual and in person residencies will include the elements of authentic, inclusive, strategic, and impactful leadership.
- The program will provide tools and frameworks for expanding and developing leadership styles and creating an inclusive and diverse network to foster a strong sense of belonging and also enhancing their voice, presence, and influence.

The details of individual elements of the program are mentioned below:
1) **Virtual and In-person Residencies:** Cohort members explore leadership frameworks, research, and tools in highly interactive residencies and workshop-style sessions focused on dynamic practice. The sessions include dynamic discussions and hands-on exercises to enhance skills, apply them, and reflect on lessons learned.
2) **Leadership Assessments:** These are developmental tools that provide meaningful data on understanding one's leadership traits, identify strengths to leverage, set short- and long-term development goals, and make the most of the current challenges and opportunities.
3) **Coaching:** Cohort members are paired with an executive coach who works with them to build on their strengths and address areas for growth. Leadership style assessments will inform these conversations and enhance each participant's understanding of their own leadership skills. With this feedback and support from their coach, participants can decide which leadership competencies to focus on, paving the road for them to be a more powerful and effective leader.
4) **Access to Mentorship:** Effective women leaders are championed by a strong support network, including mentors. We identify senior-level leaders to serve as mentors to the

cohort. Mentoring groups, comprised of multiple participants and one mentor, are formed based on complementary backgrounds and professional trajectories. Participants will be able to rely on their mentor as a technical and career resource through the programme.

5) **Leadership Projects:** A leadership project is an opportunity for participants to design and lead impactful self-driven projects that tap into their expertise, network, passion and creativity while simultaneously serving as an avenue for practically applying their learnings to create an impact.

6) **Lift Off:** The event at the end of the programme celebrates the group's growth as they graduate to a new phase of their leadership. During the Lift Off, participants are provided a platform to present their Leadership Projects to a larger audience, including influential stakeholders from the STEM fields, policy makers, and domain experts, subject to their availability.

4. Eligibility

The prerequisites to apply for Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship includes,

i)   You identify as a woman.

ii) You are a mid-career entrepreneur or innovator with a minimum of eight (8) years* of experience in STEM and/or Public Health fields. (*Completed PhDs and advanced degrees such as post-docs will be counted as work experience).

iii) You are a founder/co-founder/CEO of a registered STEM and/or public health startup or enterprise in India.

iv) You are an Indian national and currently reside and work within India.

v)   You possess ease in written and verbal communication in English.

vi) You live in the India Standard Time (IST) time zone for at least 75 percent of the programme duration, as time zone compatibility is essential to engage effectively with peers within and outside of the touchpoints.

5. Expectations from the Applicants

i) Commitment

- Upon selection, the participant will be required to attend all the virtual sessions and the two mandatory in-person residencies.

- All the programme costs, including travel, food and lodging for the in-person residencies will be covered. However, no stipend will be paid to the selected fellows.

- Access to a computer and stable internet connection would be required to fully access all the material provided through the leadership development program and attend any virtual sessions (as applicable).

- The participants would be asked to complete a psychometric assessment to better inform them about leadership strengths and growth areas.

- While the following are not technical requirements, our hope is that the participants will bring their passion, and commitment to the programme, and engage actively with peers, mentors, and take full advantage of the resources provided.

ii) Leadership Project

The leadership projects would enable the participants to apply their skills, address real-world challenges, and make an impact in their fields. The leadership development programme would facilitate refinement and structuring of the project. Implementation of the project does not have to be fully completed by the end of the programme but can be continued beyond it. A leadership project can be something that the applicant is passionate about and focuses on improving STEM or Public Health outcomes by adopting a gender lens. The leadership projects may be designed to address real-world challenges related to the themes as below:

- Centering Women and Girls in STEM Innovation, Policy, and Implementation.
- Catalysing Institutional Transformation for Inclusive STEM and Public Health Systems
- Optimizing Pathways to Leadership.
- Building Integrated, Resilient, and STEM-Enabled Health Systems.
- Driving Impact Through Science, Technology, and Entrepreneurship for Better livelihood outcomes.

A leadership project could accomplish one or more of the following, but is not limited to:

- Developing new or improved technology solutions or services in STEM or public health.
- Improving a system, process, or approach within one's organization or ecosystem to better support STEM-based women innovators and entrepreneurs.
- Promoting awareness of S&T, health, and/or gender issues in a particular group/community.
- Expanding the power and influence of women to improve STEM and/or public health outcomes.

The project proposal (which will be a part of the application form) should include a background of the project (100-300 words), project implementation description (100-300 words) and expected impact of the proposed project (100-300 words). The Project implementation description may include how one plan to accomplish & implement their project, feasibility of the project, and continuation of the project beyond the leadership programme.

Kindly note that BIRAC or WomenLift Health would **not** provide any funding for the leadership project. The support provided would be mainly in the form of connecting the participants with highly experienced mentors, and experts within the network. The peers can also be excellent resource for enhancing one's project.

6. Application Timelines and Key Dates

Program Stages	Key Months
Call Opens	18 December 2025
Closure Of Submission	23 January 2026
Cohort Announcement	April 2026
Cohort Onboarding (Virtual)	April 2026
Immersion Event (In-person)	May 2026
Virtual Learning Sessions	June 2026 - February 2027
Lift Off Event (In-person)	March 2027

7. Application Guidelines and Process

The details of the program and the application submission format can be accessed through this application link.

The process for submitting the application online is detailed below:

A. Go to BIRAC's website **https://www.birac.nic.in** // Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship **Application Link**

B. An account needs to be created to access the application page.

C. If you are already a registered user, then kindly enter your login credential at the below link in order to submit the application: **https://birac.nic.in/login.php**

D. Once you login into **https://birac.nic.in** by using login credentials, kindly click on "Grand Challenges India (GCI)" under programmes. Click to submit new proposal under Grand Challenges India.

E. Select "Women's Leadership in STEM Entrepreneurship" on the dashboard to start filling the application.

F. Applicants are advised to fill and submit their applications early without waiting for the last date in order to avoid any last-minute contingencies. The system stops accepting applications automatically after 4:00 PM of the last date of submission.

G. In case of any query, please drop an email at **user-23@birac.nic.in**

H. Applicants are advised to provide sufficient details in their applications to allow an informed and fair evaluation/review (Refer Annexure 1).

I. Requests for changes in the Applications once submitted will not be entertained.

J. Please read through the Application in its entirety and ensure that your technical details and organization details are in compliance with the eligibility criteria provided. Applications that do not meet the eligibility criteria and/or do not directly respond to the call area will not be reviewed, regardless of other parameters.

8. Documents Required

i)   Current Resume or CV
ii) A brief Leadership project proposal (part of the application form)

9. Contact Information

Further information can be obtained at BIRAC website. www.birac.nic.in

Contact Person

Dr. Debanjana Dey, Senior Program Manager, Email: user-23@birac.nic.in

<div align="center">or</div>

Dr Chandra Madhavi, In-Charge, Grand Challenges India, Email pmubmgf5.birac@nic.in

Address:

Biotechnology Industrial Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), (A Government of India Enterprise), Grand Challenges India (GCI), 5th Floor, NSIC Business Park, NSIC Bhawan, Okhla, New Delhi – 110020
Tel: +91-11-49968888

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Annexure – I

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Selection Process

- Grand Challenges India (GCI) - BIRAC will screen the proposals for eligibility. If an application is found to be incomplete or not complying with the provisions described in the Request for Application, the application will be considered ineligible.

- Proposals that meet the eligibility criteria will be reviewed by an expert committee. After evaluation, the expert committee will recommend shortlisted applications.

- The shortlisted candidates will be called for a personal interaction with the expert committee who will make the final selection of 30 participants for the leadership program.