

# Feminno – Supporting female scientists

The 2021–2022 Swiss Startup Radar report by Startupticker.ch highlighted some important facts about gender imbalance in the startup sector:

- The share of start-ups led by a female CEO is about 10% worldwide and in Switzerland it is slightly below that average.
- The median of the total venture capital generated by Swiss start-ups with a male CEO is 2.7 times higher than that of start-ups with a female CEO.

Dr. Daniela Gunz's experience ranges from 15 years in clinical research in big pharma to 5 years in the digital health startup scene. Since 2018, Dr. Daniela Gunz has been one of the coaches of feminno and in 2020 has taken over the coordinator role of the feminno program initiated by ETH Zürich, the University of Zurich, and University in Basel. feminno is a tailored program for female scientists of all disciplines – from life sciences, natural sciences, medicine, health, psychology, tech and similar – acting as a bridge between academic research and innovation, entrepreneurship, and industry. We hear from Dr. Daniela Gunz on the feminno program and women entrepreneurs in Switzerland.

Why was it necessary to launch the feminno initiative 6 years ago? What needs is feminno trying to solve? The founders of the program, Dr. Melanie Paschke and Dr. Manuela Dahinden have realized that the potential for female founders of spin-off was there when looking at research outcome of female PhDs and postdocs. But female researchers may need, initially, a different support in bringing their business idea to life. Timely women-only accelerator programs as feminno build supporting networks that include other women, female role models and experts. Being in a sensitive transition phase at the end of PhD or postdoctoral fellowships they offer a space for an accompanied ideation phase and for exploring the resources for setting innovation into practice.

What impact has the feminno initiative had until now? What have been the biggest achievements and success stories?

The feminno program has a focus on entrepreneurship but also on career development. It invites female researchers with an innovative idea (from ideation to MVP) to challenge this idea and to develop a business plan. At the same time leadership trainings and company visit with access to female role models in industry take place. This all shall help to make an informed decision at the end of the program whether a woman would like to pursue an academic career, a career in industry or become a female founder of her spin-off and continue to do entrepreneurship training and write proposals to get additional funding to drive her innovation forward.

We started in 2018 and to date we completed six rounds of feminno, with 110 women finishing the program. Success stories are manifold. With Babylat, Digit Soil, Plantipolis, Treeless Packm and Collabree we have spin-offs and start-ups that are on the market and feminno was part of the training and support that these female founders were getting to launch their businesses. More start-ups are in earlier phases, still funded by university grants to continue the research and/or to improve their prototype.

In addition, we see that some women pursue their academic career to become professors while the majority of the women (app. 70–80%) enter the private industry sector. The entrepreneur training (incl. leadership training) they obtained in feminno helps them to become "intrapreneurs" and to move up the career ladder faster.

So taken together, every single woman in the training is a success story as she has a chance – through the program – to get a clearer picture where she sees herself in her professional life, as a female founder, a professor at university or a businesswoman in big corporate, an SME or in the public domain.

What is important about the program is that also the coaches, mentors, trainers, and steering committee members are to 90% female. That creates a unique safe place to prototype, ask questions, learn, and grow.

What do current statistics on gender balance in the Swiss startup ecosystem tell us?

For example: evaluations by startupticker.ch found that startups with female CEOs closed 9.4% of all financing rounds in 2022 in Switzerland, corresponding to only 3.1% of the total invested capital.



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Dr. Daniela Gunz, Program Coordinator feminno

It is quite difficult to determine the gender balance in the Swiss start-up ecosystem and produce numbers, making sure we are not comparing apples with pears. The start-ups that VCs usually see are science/tech-based, demonstrate innovation, have scalable models, target international markets etc. and the funding that goes into such start-ups is quite low, I have to admit.

However, a study from FHNW showed that female founders are on the rise, still too slowly for our liking. The percentage of women among founders has almost doubled and now amounts to 31.6 percent, compared to 20 years ago. The proportion of founders with an academic background has also increased. Every second founder now has a university degree, twenty years ago, it was still one in three. The recently published FEMSPIN Report analyzing the entrepreneurship activities at Swiss Universities, the ETH group and the Universities of Applied Sciences reveals an average share of female founders of 14%–17% in the years 2019–2021 – with slightly increasing values. If only spin-offs are considered, the share of women is lower, averaging 10% in 2019 and 15% in 2021. So, there is still a long way to go.

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#### What barriers do women often face in the startup world?

I can cite here the recently published FEMreport, summarizing feedback from female founders. Access to funding is quite an important hurdle, getting less finances with similar ideas, business plans and financial projection is demotivating. Maybe we should do “blind pitches” like blind auditions!

The missing visibility of female role models can make it difficult for female founders to continue or even start with an own business. They also miss female mentors from whom they could learn and use as network. The usual juggle between care work and career as well as the

stereotypes and our social upbringing are additional barriers. I am usually quite astonished at the beginning of the feminno program when brilliant female scientists admit that they are feeling sometimes undervalued, are ignored in team meetings, and suffer from lower self-esteem as their male peers. I am glad to say that with the feminno leadership training, access to female role models from the industry and the start-up ecosystem, we can give these women quite a boost!

#### What do you think is needed to make the Swiss startup ecosystem more open to female founders? What tools and initiatives are known to work?

We only have started some years ago with “female-only” programs, trainings, communities, and networking, so it might be too early to have proper numbers. But seeing the lively atmosphere at entrepreneurship centers and start-up campus, the urge to make oneself heard and seen, to demand what it takes to build a startup (especially from the younger generation), the mutual help amongst women of different age groups, is immensely powerful and makes me feel positive. So I ask for funding to continue programs like feminno or the FEMseries organized by the FEMtrepreneurs.

#### What would be your biggest wish when it comes to gender parity in the tech scene in Switzerland in the next 5 years?

That we do not distinguish between founders and female founders! An innovative idea with a proper business plan, the potential to scale, taking into consideration the SDG goals we have is worth to be funded, regardless of who the CEO and the team are with regards to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc. My wish for women is that they become more self-confident, focus more on themselves and their goals, make demands, get rid of the widespread perfectionism, dare more, accept that making mistakes is OK, develop a voice and reach out to other women for support. I close with a quote from Madeleine Albright: “There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.”

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