Internalised Barriers:
How systemic challenges shape mindset and confidence

Introduction

External barriers (such as lack of access to opportunities, societal biases and systemic discrimination) often have profound internal consequences. When individuals face repeated obstacles in their professional or personal lives, these barriers can become internalised, shaping their beliefs, self-perception and willingness to take risks. Many women entrepreneurs in low or middle income countries face numerous barriers, and this can hinder their self-belief and progress. Understanding this process is key to overcoming its impact and reclaiming confidence and agency.

How external barriers turn into internal struggles

Repeated rejection leads to self-doubt

When people experience consistent rejection, whether in job applications, business opportunities or leadership roles, they may begin to internalise the belief that they are not good enough. This self-doubt can lead to hesitation, avoidance of new challenges and a diminished sense of capability.

Societal expectations reinforce limiting beliefs

Cultural norms and societal messages often dictate what is considered possible or acceptable. If someone is constantly told that certain achievements are not for them, because of their gender, background or status, they may unconsciously start believing it, limiting their own aspirations.

A woman entrepreneur may be living in a society that doesn't believe in her potential, support her goals, or may even actively work against her. She may then struggle to have the positive self-belief needed for success.

Lack of representation lowers confidence

When individuals do not see people like themselves in leadership positions, entrepreneurship or other fields of interest, they may struggle to envision themselves succeeding. The absence of relatable role models reinforces the belief that success is unattainable for them. This is often the case for women, as there are far fewer women in leadership positions.

Systemic barriers create learned helplessness

Discrimination, lack of access to resources and institutional biases can create a feeling of powerlessness. Over time, people may stop trying to push forward, assuming that no matter what they do, they will not succeed.

Breaking the cycle: overcoming internalised barriers

Recognising internalised barriers

The first step in overcoming these limitations is self-awareness. If you are struggling with internalised barriers, reflect on your self-doubt and ask:

- Where do these beliefs come from?
- Are they based on personal experience, or have they been shaped by societal messages and repeated obstacles?
- Would I hold these same beliefs if I had grown up in a different environment?

If you're a mentor, you can support your mentee to explore these questions.

Reframing the narrative

Changing the way we view challenges is essential. For example, instead of thinking, "I'm not capable", you can shift your thought to, "I have faced obstacles, but I am resourceful and capable of finding solutions." Reframing helps break the cycle of self-doubt. Mentors can help their mentees find supportive and positive reframed thoughts.

Building a support network

Surrounding yourself with mentors, peers and communities that encourage growth can counteract feelings of isolation and reinforce confidence. Support networks provide validation, resources and opportunities that might not be accessible otherwise.

Developing skills and knowledge

Education and skills training help you regain control over your circumstances. Whether through financial literacy, professional development or leadership training, learning new skills can empower you to push past external and internal limitations.

Challenging systemic barriers

While internal mindset shifts are crucial, addressing the root causes of external barriers is also necessary. Advocacy, policy change and collective action can help dismantle systemic obstacles, making it easier for future generations to succeed without internalising limitations.

If you're a mentor, you have an important role to play here in using your position to influence viewpoints in your circles.

Conclusion

External barriers can have a lasting psychological impact, shaping self-perception and limiting potential. However, by recognising and challenging these internalised beliefs, you can regain confidence, take risks and break free from restrictive mindsets.

You also don't have to do it alone, find and use your support network with your mentor, personal relationships and other woman entrepreneurs.

Finally, success is not solely determined by external circumstances; it is also shaped by resilience, mindset and the willingness to push beyond imposed limits.