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Navigating Barriers:

Struggles and Strategies of Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs in the Bay Area

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(Badwal, P. (2017, October 9). Fempreneurs!! - ENT101 - medium.
Medium.<https://medium.com/ent101/fempreneurs-1199a2b33810>)

I interviewed Emily over Zoom as she was driving to another city. She squeezed our 60-minute interview in between a campus visit and back-to-back strategy meetings for her growing EdTech startup. Her experience echoes those of other immigrant founders I spoke with: Linda, a green-card holder who operates a florist shop in the East Bay; Susan, a Chinese-cuisine restaurant owner who is now scaling her business; and Mia, a student on an F-1 visa piloting a peer-advising EdTech platform. Their stories reveal both the promise and the prejudice built into

¹ Every summer, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends a cohort of ~30 Cal students to Sacramento for an eight-week public service internship. In 2025, the cohort included 11 Diversity & Entrepreneurship Fellows, who focused their research on topics related to POC, immigrant, and/or women-owned businesses.

our innovation ecosystem. I use “startup” broadly to include tech ventures as well as small businesses pioneering new services.

CHALLENGES

Visa Constraints Stall Momentum

Emily spent eleven years at a top-tier software company on an [H-1B visa](#), accumulating promotions and honors, yet unable to quit and chase her own dreams in the education industry, something she knew she wanted to do very early on. *“If I plan on leaving my job when I am on the H-1B visa to build my own startup, my company won’t be able to sponsor my visa; I’d have to leave the U.S right away. I only launched after my green card came through,”* she told me, recalling the day in 2018 when her permanent residency finally arrived, and with it the “permission” to follow her passion. She believed quality education should be open and accessible for everyone, especially for students with non-traditional backgrounds like herself. By then, she said, she was 35, an [age](#) when many investors tune out “older” founders, especially in the competitive environment of the Bay area. Emily shared that those lost years aren’t merely days on a calendar; they represent the energy and risk tolerance that younger entrepreneurs with no visa constraints often enjoy.

Once Emily could legally launch her company, new hurdles emerged. She initially sought out co-ethnic investors, expecting cultural affinity but finding entrenched stereotypes. In one 15-minute pitch with Chinese-background investors, she faced blunt questions:

“So you’re a solo founder at this age...Are you married? Do you plan to have kids? How can you run a startup and raise a normal family?”

They even suggested that the only way for her was to “find a business partner” to increase her credibility, leaping to conclusions before hearing her full plan. In contrast, U.S. investors never asked about her personal life, yet Emily couldn’t ignore the double standard in their feedback. *“They’d focus on traction and market fit, then quietly decline,”* she recalls, *“but for so many times, I watched male founders with far less experience and weaker products get more enthusiastic follow-ups and even term-sheet interest when I attend pitch events.”* Even without explicit questions, this pattern showed that women founders must clear a higher bar just to get a polite “maybe.”

Coffee chats and more AI-focused pitch events often feel alien to non-native entrepreneurs. Mia admits, *“I can’t pretend to be casually confident while actually talking about the future of my company, something that’s so serious for me. Coffee chats sometimes feel performative and demotivating.”* For many non-native English speakers, small talk can become another hurdle rather than a help.

STRATEGIES OR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Bootstrapping & Niche Partnerships

With traditional Venture Capital doors closed, Emily turned to unconventional allies as she sought to establish a new form of educational pathway for nontraditional high school students. A local school principal had once dismissed her plan of helping international high school students enroll in community college, take classes online, and transfer as “only for academic failures,” but Emily stayed calm and sensible, sending monthly progress updates on student outcomes. One year later, the principal signed a pilot contract with her. That partnership became the first proof point investors asked about. To Emily, grit and persistence can be the most valuable strategy.

Other foreign-born woman entrepreneurs shared different ways of bootstrapping and fund raising, centering community partnerships. Linda, a florist from the Canto area in South China, bootstrapped her Oakland shop, doubling as a community advocate: *“I co-founded a volunteer group after an anti-Asian incident; our advocacy meetings doubled as customer outreach. That activism literally filled my shop.”* Susan, a Chinese-cuisine restaurateur, hosts quarterly “Tea & Talk” tastings for local bloggers, turning them into ambassadors that promote her restaurants in their social circles. These examples show how immigrant founders repurpose social capital to fuel growth.

Rather than forcing conformity in general pitch events, Mia gravitates toward culturally aligned circles, such as international-student associations, women-founder groups, and industry-specific networks, where introductions lead to backers who understand cross-border markets. Mia notes how a female alum in her mentorship circle connected her to a VC who *“actually understood my customer base.”*

Time and again, these founders use a growth mindset and reframe rejection as data, not defeat. *“Don’t settle, keep looking.”* At the heart of Emily’s work is a mission: leveling the playing field for underserved students. *“Education changed my life,”* she says. That passion sustains her through late nights refining product demos and early mornings prepping her team for board meetings. Mia also shared a similar sentiment that each “no” teaches her something new about her model, her pitch, or the market.

Policy & Structural Reforms

Their journey reveals a critical gap: without a dedicated startup visa, immigrant founders lose precious momentum. We need a policy that lets skilled entrepreneurs launch immediately, rather than waiting years for green cards. Venture-fund firms must diversify decision-makers so that questions about marriage and age give way to interrogations of addressable market and growth potential. And incubators should swap cookie-cutter pitch-deck classes for mentorship-driven programs that honor cultural differences and personal narratives.

If we truly believe immigrant women power Silicon Valley's future (e.g., [data show that immigrant-founded startups create jobs at a 42 percent higher rate than native-born firms](#)), we cannot afford to gatekeep their potential. It's time for policies and practices to match our rhetoric, so the next generation of Linda, Susan, Emily and Mia can turn their ideas into reality without delay or detour.