



Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour  
Matagaluega o Pisinisi, Alamanuia ma Leipa



# Women's Economic Empowerment and Entrepreneurship in the Pacific

March 15, 2024, 15:00--17:00

Conference Room, Lava Hotel, Apia, Samoa

## Background

Empowering women and closing the gender gap in the world of work are essential to realizing gender equality. If women played the same role in labor markets as men, as much as US\$28 trillion could be added to the global annual gross domestic product (GDP) by 2025. In the Asia-Pacific region, it is estimated that closing gender disparities could add as much as US\$ 4.5 trillion – a 12 per cent increase – to the region's GDP annually by 2025<sup>1</sup>. Entrepreneurship presents numerous opportunities for women to overcome poverty, be empowered and contribute to the economic growth of their countries.

While women-owned businesses have been on the rise over the past several decades in the region, women's economic potential continues to be limited due to challenges they face in their entrepreneurial journeys - from limited access to markets, finance, information, the burden of unpaid care work, relevant education and skills training, coupled with discriminatory laws and regulations.

For example, in East Asia and the Pacific, the formal finance gap for women entrepreneurs is 58%<sup>2</sup>. It is estimated that only 19% of registered formal businesses in Fiji are owned by women<sup>3</sup>. In Samoa, while there is no accurate estimate of micro-enterprises or breakdown by industry type, it is estimated that 40-46% of all MSMEs are women-owned<sup>4</sup>. Although significantly higher than Fiji, evidence shows that the vast majority (from 75% to 88% depending on various sources) are micro-level and home-based enterprises, with many falling in the informal sector. Along with access to finance and credit, women entrepreneurs have less access to opportunities for capacity building specially in the digital domain that are critical for them to gain the knowledge and skills to establish, manage and their grow their businesses. Furthermore, appropriate policy, regulatory, and institutional frameworks which are the foundations on which to shape women's economic opportunities and foster women's entrepreneurship are often lacking.

ESCAP's Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship (CWE) project was designed to address the above-mentioned challenges, with the ultimate objective of enhancing women's economic empowerment and contributing to gender equality in Asia and the Pacific. CWE is a regional initiative being implemented in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey. 2018. The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> ADB and the Asia Foundation. 2018. Emerging Lessons for Women Entrepreneurs in Asia and the Pacific: Case Studies from the Asian Development Bank and the Asia Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> <https://thebpp.com.au/partner-news/empowering-women-entrepreneurs-in-fiji-through-fintech/>

<sup>4</sup> ESCAP. 2021. A Data Overview: Taking Stock of Women Entrepreneurs in Samoa.



and Viet Nam, that aims to 1) strengthen the entrepreneurial policy and governance ecosystems that foster women's entrepreneurship, 2) enhance women entrepreneurs' access to capital through innovative financing mechanisms, and 3) strengthen women entrepreneurs' business and digital ICT skills through relevant training and tools.

Notable progress has been made in Fiji and Samoa in terms of strengthening the women's entrepreneurial ecosystem over the past five years. These include:

- establishment of national multistakeholder and cross-sectoral mechanisms for policymaking in relation to women's entrepreneurship. In Fiji, this mechanism informed the national plan of action on women's economic empowerment and garnered high-level endorsement by the Cabinet, legitimizing and creating visibility for the agenda;
- reviews of national SME strategies and policies, resulting in improved access to finance through targeted approaches and dedicated funds for women entrepreneurs, formal definitions of MSMEs and WMSMEs, development of M&E frameworks and inclusion of gender-responsive provisions in MSME policies, strategies, and acts; and
- strong evidence generated to understand and fill data gaps in relation to women's entrepreneurship, including on the business licensing process, baseline assessments, impact of COVID-19 on WMSMEs, and risks of the informal economy on women entrepreneurs, among others.

### Key Questions and Outcomes

The objective of this dialogue would be to showcase some of these success stories even beyond the project and explore synergies for larger collaborations and uptake. The specific objectives of the session are to:

- 1) Highlight the success stories and challenges vis-à-vis women's entrepreneurship in the Pacific region, drawing on examples from the CWE programme in Fiji and Samoa;
- 2) Convene representatives from Pacific countries for dialogue, knowledge exchange and learning on women's entrepreneurship; and
- 3) Facilitate panel discussion on pressing and emerging issues specific to the Pacific region to inform future action and recommendations related to relevant SDGs on women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship.

### Participants

The dialogue will bring together participants from relevant key ministries, women entrepreneurs/representatives from women entrepreneurs' associations, UN agencies, CROP agencies, the private sector, and academic institutions working towards advancing women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.



Hours	Draft Program
14:30-15:00	<b>Arrival and registration</b>
15:00-15:20	<p><b>Welcome remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Cai Cai</b>, Chief, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section, Social Development Division, <a href="#">UNESCAP</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Introductory remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mr. Themba Kalua</b>, Resident Coordinator, UN Multi-Country Office, <a href="#">Samoa</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Special remarks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Mereseini Rakuita</b>, Principal Strategic Lead – Pacific Women and Girls of the Pacific Community (<a href="#">SPC</a>)</li> </ul>
15:20-15:30	<p><b>Session 1: Presentation of the CWE project</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sudha Gooty</b>, Programme Manager, Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship, <a href="#">UNESCAP</a></li> </ul>
15:30-16:30	<p><b>Session 2: Panel discussion on women's entrepreneurship with the following focus: Ms. Cai Cai (Moderator)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenges and Opportunities - Business Registration and the Informal Economy</li> <li>• Digital Transformation and Women's Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Gender Lens Review of SME Policies</li> <li>• Impact of Climate Change on Women's Entrepreneurship</li> </ul> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Fiu Jacinta Matulino</b>, Assistant CEO, Ministry of Commerce Industry and Labor, <a href="#">Samoa</a></li> <li>• <b>Ms. Amelia Nairoba</b>, Principal Research Officer, Ministry of Women, Children &amp; Social Protection, <a href="#">Fiji</a></li> <li>• <b>Ms Lisa Kamu</b>, Woman Entrepreneur from Indoors General Store and member of Samoa Association of Manufacturers and Exporters</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Lealaisalanoa Francis Reupena</b>, CEO Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, <a href="#">Samoa</a></li> <li>• <b>Ms. Agnes Fruean</b>, Women Entrepreneur from Tavai Designs, Environmentally Conscious Fashion</li> <li>• <b>Ms. Vashti Maharaj</b>, Adviser, Digital Trade Policy, <a href="#">The Commonwealth Secretariat</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Open discussions</b></p>
16:30-17:00	<p><b>Closing remarks and way forward</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms. Cai Cai</b>, Chief, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section, Social Development Division, <a href="#">UNESCAP</a></li> </ul>

For information, please contact:

**Ms. Cai Cai**, Chief, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP, at [caic@un.org](mailto:caic@un.org)

**Mr. Sudip Ranjan Basu**, Deputy Head, Subregional Office for the Pacific, Fiji, at [basu@un.org](mailto:basu@un.org)