

REGIONAL FORUM ON WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE CENTER, BANGKOK

9 MAY 2024



DRAFT Concept Note

Context

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 2025¹. 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 2025². Entrepreneurship presents numerous opportunities for women to overcome poverty, be empowered and contribute to the economic growth of their countries.

Yet, women's economic potential in the region continues to be limited due to challenges they face in their entrepreneurial journeys - from limited access to markets, finance, information, and relevant education and skills training, coupled with discriminatory laws and regulations, unfriendly work environment, and the burden of unpaid care work.

These barriers are primarily rooted in social norms and customary practices that prescribe gender roles, and thus limit women's entrepreneurial abilities and their ability to achieve full economic potential. For example, in East Asia and the Pacific, the formal finance gap for women entrepreneurs is 58%³. A large segment of women do not hold bank accounts, thus finding it difficult to deal with and access finance from formal banking institutions. Other times they face challenges to meet the collateral or administrative requirements needed to access finance.

Along with access to finance and credit, women entrepreneurs have less access to opportunities for capacity building that are critical for them to gain the knowledge and skills to establish, manage and their grow their businesses. In Asia and the Pacific, inequalities between women and men persist in terms of education, training, and job experience opportunities, which are further

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

² McKinsey. 2018. The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific.

³ 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.

compounded by the disproportionate distribution of unpaid care and domestic work at the household level which limits women from engaging in productive entrepreneurial activities. The majority of women in ASEAN countries, for example, are starting enterprises without prior business experience and formal training, thus affecting the scale, sustainability and growth of their enterprises⁴.

Furthermore, appropriate policy, regulatory, and institutional frameworks are the foundations on which to shape women's economic opportunities and foster women's entrepreneurship. Indeed, evidence suggests that a conducive legal environment is associated with a higher share of female entrepreneurs. In Asia and the Pacific, entrepreneurship is one of the main pathways for women's economic empowerment and equality and has the potential to have a multiplier effect on family well-being, poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. However, policies and legislation are often blind to the specific circumstances, needs and interests of women. Such ecosystem and institutional barriers thus jeopardize women entrepreneurs' capacity to grow and develop their businesses and prevent them from fully participating in the economy.

Given the urgency of addressing the above challenges, ESCAP's Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship (CWE) project, with financial support from the Government of Canada, was designed with the objective of enhancing women's economic empowerment and contributing to gender equality in Asia and the Pacific, building on ESCAP's existing work demonstrating that entrepreneurship is a key driver for both. CWE is a regional initiative 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.
- 3) strengthen women entrepreneurs' business and digital ICT skills through relevant training and tools. The three 'pillars' were selected based on evidence and ESCAP's experience in fostering women's entrepreneurship in the region.

Objective

Significant progress has been made since CWE's inception and throughout its implementation, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown. It is in this context and the upcoming closure of the CWE project that the Regional Forum on Women's Entrepreneurship has been conceptualized, with the objective of disseminating and exchanging best practices, lessons learned, and taking stock of the current needs and recommendations vis-à-vis women entrepreneurship in the Asia and Pacific. The Regional Forum aims to bring together not only CWE partners, but also other stakeholders and relevant actors from across the ASEAN, South Asia, and Pacific region. The specific objectives of the forum are to:

⁴ ESCAP. 2022. Strengthening Women's Entrepreneurship in National Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Policies and Action Plans: Toolkit for Policymakers.

- 1) Provide an overview of CWE, and share good practices and lessons learnt from on-the ground implementation.
- 2) Hold consultations around women entrepreneurship and the policy and governance environment, ICT and business skills development, and innovative financing.
- 3) Take stock of the existing needs and recommendations for the way forward to enhance women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific region.

Participants

The Regional Forum will bring together representatives from relevant key ministries of the Asia-Pacific countries, in particular ministries responsible for SME development, women, planning, trade, investment, and national women's machineries. It will also include women entrepreneurs/representatives from women entrepreneurs' associations, relevant UN agencies, the private sector, and academic institutions working towards advancing women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

Tentative Agenda

Time	Session	Speaker
9:00 – 9:05	Welcome	ESCAP
9:05 – 9:35	Opening Remarks	<p>Ms. Lin Yang, Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme, ESCAP</p> <p>Ms. Cathy Hardman, Counsellor (Political / Economic) and Permanent Observer to ESCAP, Embassy of Canada to Thailand</p> <p>H.E. Ms. Lynda Tabuya, Honorable Minister of Women Children and Social Protection, Government of Fiji</p>
	Group Photo	
09:35 – 10:45	<p><u>Panel 1: ASEAN Policymakers Toolkit</u></p> <p>Moderator: Dr. Srinivas Tata, Director, Social Development Division, ESCAP</p>	<p><u>Presentation on the ASEAN Toolkit</u></p> <p>Ms. Sudha Gooty, Programme Manager, Catalyzing Women’s Entrepreneurship, Social Development Division, ESCAP</p> <p><u>Panelists</u></p> <p>Ms. Mereseini Rakuita, Principal Strategic Lead – Pacific Women and Girls of the Pacific Community (SPC), Fiji</p> <p>Ms. Emma Asusano, Director, Bureau of Small and Medium Enterprise Development</p>

		<p>Department of Trade and Industry, Philippines</p> <p>Ms. Izniza Afzan Mustafa, ASEAN Secretariat (Virtual)</p> <p>Ms. Katja Freiwald, Regional Lead, Women's Economic Empowerment and Migration Unit, UN Women Asia and Pacific</p> <p>Dr. ML. Preeyapun Sridhavat, Board Member, ASEAN Women's Entrepreneurs Network, Thailand</p>
10:45 – 11:00	Coffee Break	
11:00 – 12:15	<p><u>Panel 2: Policy and Governance Environment</u></p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Cai Cai, Chief of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP</p>	<p><u>Panelists</u></p> <p>Ms. Trinh Thi Huong, Viet Nam, Deputy Director General, Agency for Enterprise Development, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Viet Nam</p> <p>Ms. Jacinta Matulino, Assistant CEO, Ministry of Commerce Industry and Labor, Samoa (Virtual)</p> <p>Ms. Pramila Acharya, President of South Asia Women Development forum, Nepal</p>

		<p>Mr. Layhy Chhea, Director of SME Department, Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI), Cambodia</p> <p>Mr. Chhunnhak, Director General Gender Equality and Economic Development Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA)</p> <p>Ms. Nadira Yusoff, Founder and CEO, Kiddocare - Care Entrepreneur</p>
12:15 - 13:30	Lunch	
13:30 - 14:30	<p><u>Panel 3: ICT and Business Skills Development</u></p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Kiyoungh Ko, Director, APCICT</p>	<p><u>Panelists</u></p> <p>Mr. Shahid Akbar, CEO, Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development, Bangladesh</p> <p>Ms. Duong Thi Kim Lien, Direct, Institute of Business Innovation Accelerator, Viet Nam</p> <p>Ms. Sharada Rijal Treasurer South Asian Women Development Forum Nepal</p> <p>Mr. Seng Youraden, Director, Banking Supervision Department, National Bank of Cambodia</p>

		Ms. Mona Lisa Kamu Business Director Indoors General Store Samoa
14:30 - 14:45	Coffee Break	
14:45 - 16:00	<p><u>Panel 4 and Plenary: Access to Finance</u></p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Kal Joffres, CEO and Founder, Tandemic</p>	<p><u>Panelists</u></p> <p>Ms. Rupa Chanda, Director of Trade, Investment and Innovation, ESCAP</p> <p>Ms. Elena Mayer-Besting, Programme Management Officer, Trade, Investment and Innovation, ESCAP</p> <p>Ms. Joy Anderson, founder and president of Criterion (TBC)</p> <p>Ms. Archi Ananya, Impact and partnership manager, iFarmer</p> <p>Ms. Fiona Uagunu, Coordinator, Women Entrepreneurs Business Council</p> <p>Ms. Wati Seeto, Financial Inclusion manager, Reserve Bank of Fiji</p>
16:00 - 16:15	Closing Remarks	Dr. Srinivas Tata, Director of Social Development Division, ESCAP