South Asia Women’s Entrepreneurship Symposium

Accelerating Women’s Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh

From September 2012 through October 2015, The Asia Foundation implemented an innovative South Asia regional program to advance women’s entrepreneurship. This program, supported by the U.S. Department of State, advanced the U.S. Government’s “New Silk Road” goals of enhanced regional economic integration and increased trade across South and Central Asia. The program built directly on the DOS 2012 South Asia Women’s Entrepreneurship Symposium (SAWES), and was implemented in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, with engagement from the Maldives, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

OVERVIEW

In Bangladesh, women continue to face a range of cultural, financial, and legal barriers to start and grow businesses that must be addressed. At the SAWES forum in Dhaka in December 2012, participants from South and Central Asia identified specific barriers affecting women entrepreneurs, including access to finance, markets, information, and networks; and discriminatory laws and practices. Following this forum, The Asia Foundation designed and implemented a project to:

- Foster a South Asian regional network of women entrepreneurs to facilitate women’s ability to grow their businesses and conduct trade.
- Support strategic projects in South Asia that build the capacity of women’s business associations and women leaders to be able to support an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs.

PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

COUNTRY-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The Asia Foundation conducted an assessment and mapping in Bangladesh to understand strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of six business associations and chambers of commerce.

EXPOSURE TOUR

An exposure tour in April 2014 brought together more than 50 women entrepreneurs from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Participants visited the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee’s village-level entrepreneurship programs for women and a woman-owned ready-made garment factory, met with the SME Foundation, attended a networking event, and showcased their products at a mini-marketplace.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Through a SAWES small grants competition, the Bangladesh Women Chamber of...
Commerce & Industry received a grant to facilitate cross-border trade, and increase the role of customs and border officials and other relevant stakeholders in promoting women’s entrepreneurship.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIALOGUE
In September 2015, a public-private dialogue brought together representatives from four major Banks, women’s associations, and women entrepreneurs and business owners to identify policy recommendations in key areas including how to achieve women-friendly banking environments nationwide.

ONLINE CONNECTIVITY
SAWES established a Facebook page with more than 32,000 members that connects aspiring entrepreneurs; developed a business-to-business web portal which will provide regional market access for women entrepreneurs, facilitate cross-border networking, and be an information hub on trade and business regulations; and conducted five webinars about women’s entrepreneurship to connect and build the capacity of more than 700 participants.

NEXT STEPS
The Asia Foundation is currently exploring funding opportunities to build upon the success of the SAWES work and respond to input from program participants. Proposed activities will utilize specific strategies such as mentorship and exposure visits that have proven successful in supporting women entrepreneurs. The proposed objectives will continue to support women entrepreneurs across South Asia:

- To expand the reach of the SAWES network by connecting it to other relevant networks in Asia, including SAARC, to facilitate cross-border sharing of information and access to markets and trade.
- To advance women entrepreneurs’ use of ICT to improve their businesses.

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

CONNECTING WOMEN IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN BANGLADESH
Although IT is a booming business in South Asia, there is a dearth of women working in this field. Those who aspire to start or grow IT businesses have difficulty navigating a range of legal, regulatory, and cultural barriers. The SAWES exposure visits have had important results in catalyzing new ventures to support women in IT across the region. One example is a new partnership formed to generate and share innovative ideas across borders and collaborate in business development between Luna Shamsuddoha, chairwoman of Dohtatec New Media and founder of Bangladesh Women in Technology (BWIT), and Vijayalakshmi Rao, president of Empowering Women in IT (eWIT), both participants of the India exposure tour.

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