Supporting Women’s Entrepreneurship in South Asia

Since September 2012, The Asia Foundation has run an innovative South Asia regional program to advance women’s entrepreneurship. This program, supported by the U.S. Department of State (DOS), advances the U.S. Government’s “New Silk Road” goals of enhanced regional economic integration and increased trade across South and Central Asia and builds directly on the DOS 2012 South Asia Women’s Entrepreneurship Symposium (SAWES).

OVERVIEW

Women in South Asia continue to face a range of cultural, financial, and legal barriers to their ability to start and grow businesses. This is reflected in the fact that South Asian women own less than 10 percent of small and medium enterprises in the region. Additionally, the UN reports that 80 percent of working women in the region are in vulnerable employment. To enable women to fully contribute to and benefit from economic growth, barriers to women in business need to be addressed. These barriers include limited access to finance, markets, skills training, networks, and information, as well as onerous and/or discriminatory laws and regulations.

In response, The Asia Foundation and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs in the U.S. Department of State designed a targeted program to address many of the critical barriers identified by participants at the SAWES meeting. The program engages women entrepreneurs and women’s business associations in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in a set of targeted, mutually reinforcing activities to foster the success of business women and aspiring entrepreneurs. In addition, the program has incorporated participants from Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan into certain program activities.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A strong, highly engaged network of women entrepreneurs has emerged with a prominent online and in-person presence. With over 32,000 likes, the SAWES Facebook page has become a connecting point for SAWES participants and aspiring entrepreneurs. Exposure visits have brought together women from all SAWES countries and facilitated innovative regional collaboration. This has led to the creation of new businesses and organizations in support of women entrepreneurs across the region.

The SAWES program has also built capacity of local organizations. Afghan women who are part of the SAWES network were motivated to establish the advocacy organization, Leading Entrepreneurs of Afghanistan for Development, to represent women’s concerns and interests in the economic sector. In addition, five small grants were awarded to local organizations to implement projects in support of women’s participation in cross-border trade and regional collaboration. Key action items identified at the SAWES meeting continue to drive program priorities and direction, and are the focus of these small grants. To support business skills development, a series of webinars for women entrepreneurs was created, which have drawn participants from across the region.

WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

“Studies show that investing in women is a high yield investment as gender equality in access to education, healthcare, political and economic participation is key to a country’s competitiveness and prosperity. It is a fact that women-run SMEs drive economic growth and create jobs.”

— Amb. Melanne S. Verveer, Former Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues and Asia Foundation Trustee
PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

Country-level Analysis: In order to understand country-level strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, The Asia Foundation conducted an assessment and mapping of business associations and Chambers of Commerce in each country.

Building Online Connectivity: The Foundation established a SAWES Facebook page that continues to expand its reach and serve as a connecting point for SAWES participants and aspiring entrepreneurs. Quarterly calls and an online newsletter ensure SAWES participants are involved in ongoing dialogue and program activities. In addition, the Foundation has partnered with eWIT, an India-based Women’s IT Forum, to develop a business-to-business web portal that will provide regional market access for women entrepreneurs, facilitate cross-border networking, and be an information hub on trade and business regulations.

Regional Exposure Tours: The Foundation organized three exposure tours to bring women entrepreneurs from each program country to Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka. The tours were an opportunity to network, visit successful women-run businesses, participate in trade fairs, and discuss key issues related to women’s entrepreneurship.

Small Grants: Five small grants awarded to local organizations are underway to advance regional cooperation and SAWES priorities. The Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry is enhancing a women-friendly business environment for cross-border trade through increasing responsiveness and gender-sensitivity of customs. The National Institute for Technology, Tiruchirappalli and Women Entrepreneurs’ Association of Tamil Nadu are supporting business and management capacity development of rural women entrepreneurs in India and Sri Lanka. Based in India, the Bombay Chamber of Commerce & Industry is supporting women entrepreneurs from the textile sector through providing mentoring, exposure to international markets, and trainings on trade policy. In Nepal, EduVision in Makwanpur district is helping to link rural and urban women in the district to promote entrepreneurial skills and facilitate cross-border trade with women entrepreneurs in India. Finally, the Women’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Sri Lanka is fostering regional expansion and secure markets for Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs in South Asia.

Webinars: A series of five webinars is being held in partnership with BizDivas, a national network of professional women in India, to support women’s business development. Webinars have been held on topics including business plan development, personal branding, and networking for success.

Public-Private Dialogues: Public-private dialogues are being held in each country to provide a platform for women business owners to discuss issues related to regional trade and integration with concerned stakeholders including representatives from governments and financial institutions.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Connecting Women in Information Technology

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 Dohatec 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.

Inspiring Women to be Changemakers

Sabita Mahajan’s first time leaving Nepal was to fly to New Delhi for the SAWES exposure tour in India. Ms. Mahajan spent six days in India where she met many entrepreneurs who seemed much like herself. She visited factories and organizations owned and run by women. When she returned to Nepal, she decided to end the cycle of violence in her home and left her abusive husband to start a small collective of women knitters; soon they were generating income—most for the first time. With her profits, Ms. Mahajan was able to pay rent for her one-room apartment and fees for her son’s education. Today, Ms. Mahajan is a successful entrepreneur who has helped other women earn an income.