



IMPACT STORY



DRIVING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN CHINA

Entrepreneurship is a catalyst for women's economic empowerment, which in turn is an important ingredient in building sustainable and inclusive economies and societies. In China, despite a recent surge in women's entrepreneurship, women-owned businesses tend to be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are more vulnerable in emergencies than larger companies are. In addition, many women-owned SMEs are situated in the service sector, which was hit the hardest by the pandemic. Women entrepreneurs often also struggle with greater structural barriers than their male peers do, such as access to markets and networking, and bias from investors.

UN Women's WeEmpowerAsia Programme partners with public and private sector organizations to create opportunities for women entrepreneurs and women-led businesses to grow while promoting gender equality in the workplace, marketplace, and community.

ENHANCING MARKET ACCESS

Research has indicated that an effective digital strategy is a key to the success of an enterprise. Digital transformation not only refers to the upgrading of external technology, but of internal strategic thinking as well. According to a rapid assessment UN Women China did in December 2019, digital transformation has been listed as one of the core challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. It is critical for enterprises to value and implement effective digital strategies if they want to thrive in today's highly competitive global environment and the post-COVID era.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020, WEA held an initial training on digitalization for 123 women entrepreneurs, with 97.5 per cent of participants reporting satisfaction and that their knowledge had been boosted on how to digitally transform their businesses. Then in 2021 and 2022, UN Women partnered with the China International Cooperation Association of SMEs (CICASME) to focus on women entrepreneurs' access to markets, including large supply chains. A needs assessment first identified the needs of women-owned businesses as suppliers and of large corporations as buyers; in response, the

PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

Since 2019, UN Women has partnered with the European Union (EU) to implement the **WeEmpowerAsia programme** in China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, with the aim of increasing the number of women who lead and participate in business to advance inclusive and sustainable growth.

programme then developed a training toolkit on enhancing market access for women entrepreneurs, based on which training sessions were delivered to more than 1,000 early-stage women entrepreneurs; 97 per cent gave very positive feedback, with many adding that they had started to think about their business model. The programme also delivered gender-responsive procurement training to 16 large corporations. After trainings had concluded for both entrepreneurs and corporates, a marketplace was organized between them; many on both sides reported establishing closer ties with each other as a result, including 99.5 per cent of women entrepreneurs reporting in a survey saying that they have broadened networks and contacts with companies.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN IN BUSINESS

UN Women China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chengdu New Economic Development Commission in 2020. The MOU commits to boosting women's participation and leadership in the new economy in Chengdu by making improvements to the entrepreneurial and employment ecosystem. This will include establishing a women entrepreneurs' network to help boost collaboration and exchange, providing training and connecting members to financing opportunities.

In January 2022, under this partnership, the programme contributed to the inclusion of the aim of strengthening support

for women entrepreneurs in the new economy in Chengdu's 14th Five-Year Plan for New Economic Development, by working with Institute of New Economy Development (INED). UN Women, together with National School of Development of Peking University and INED, developed evidence-based recommendations that would help integrate gender into industrial policy. The research report explores how gender equality can boost new economic development, and how best to promote women's entrepreneurship and leadership.

Focusing nationwide, UN Women China's annual International Conference on Gender Equality and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) provides a high-level platform for discussion about women's advancement in the economy. Bringing together government entities, companies, academic institutions, and the media, among other stakeholders, the conference encourages companies to provide more opportunities for women while identifying obstacles, solutions and good practices. Both the 2020 and 2021 conferences focused on the recovery of women entrepreneurs after the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing entrepreneurs to share their challenges and recovery experiences with decision-makers and other influencers, reaching over 800,000 people online and offline in the past two years.

The 2021 conference saw an exchange between entrepreneurs from China and other countries, particularly on ways to enhance access to markets and financing. For example, in one session, Indonesian entrepreneur Gina Priadini shared insights on business continuity, advising that peers investigate tax concessions and other exemptions, while constantly monitoring risk.

MOBILISING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) guide businesses on how to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community more broadly. The WeEmpowerAsia Programme has seen CEOs from across China sign the WEPs CEO Statement of Support, with over 50 women entrepreneurs, most of whom lead SMEs, signing up under the partnership with CICASME. As of June 2022, nine companies started deeper WEPs implementation, with actions including setting up Women Employee Committees, issuing sexual harassment prevention and response policies, initiating flexible working arrangements, and collecting sex-disaggregated data, among others. 48 influential women entrepreneurs in China signed the WEPs via the programme's partnership with the Mulan Initiative,

one of the large networks of influential women entrepreneurs in China. With the support of the Mulan Initiative, a series of gender and WEPs trainings were delivered to 549 company representatives throughout 2020, covering issues such as introductory knowledge about gender, laws and policies relating to gender equality, and gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19. Many participants have since publicly spoken up about gender equality in social media.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Since 2019, the WeEmpowerAsia programme in China has:

- Contributed to the inclusion of the goal of supporting women entrepreneurs in the new economy in Chengdu's 14th Five-Year Plan for New Economic Development;
- Motivated nearly 100 women entrepreneurs and business leaders to commit to the WEPs, including those leading large corporations and SMEs;
- Reached more than 1,000 women SME entrepreneurs with capacity development sessions focused on market access. Of these, 50 women entrepreneurs were connected to 16 corporations for future follow up;
- Produced one rapid assessment report to understand the needs of women-owned SMEs;
- Developed one training module on improving access to markets;
- Organized one policy dialogue to promote women's participation and leadership in the new economy.

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