

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

**SERIES: ENTREPRENEURSHIP and SMEs**

**ACCESS TO FINANCING AND ICT  
FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS  
IN THE UNECE REGION**

**Challenges and good practices**



**Geneva and New York, 2004**

## NOTE

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## FOREWORD

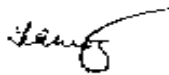
Rapid growth of women's self-employment and entrepreneurship confirms that this is an important avenue to improve women's employability. This avenue is widely recognized at the global level. It is part of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Monterrey Consensus and the Millennium Development Goals in the context of addressing gender equality, poverty alleviation and sustainability of economic growth and development. Fostering women's self-employment and entrepreneurship was also acknowledged as a policy priority by the regional Beijing +5 meeting (2000, Geneva).

There are good practices from the UNECE member countries in North America, western Europe as well as Eastern Europe and CIS, although progress has been uneven among and within countries. It certainly reflects a great diversity of the environment for SME development in the UNECE region. Good practices supporting women's entrepreneurship, initiated by Governments, civil society and other stakeholders, may facilitate the process of convergence in women entrepreneurship development based on successful cases.

This report looks at women's access to financing and ICT within progress and perspectives from

selected countries and sub-regions. Access to financing is a major challenge to starting a business, especially for women. Gender specific barriers include the traditional views on women's role, but also in many countries the lack of a collateral. In countries of Eastern Europe and the CIS, women's opportunities for entrepreneurship were strongly affected by a clear gender bias in the privatisation process, in other countries, problems with the implementation of equal rights to land and property still exist. Mainstreaming gender into financial measures supporting SMEs, but also targeted programmes, such as special credit lines and micro-credit schemes for women entrepreneurs, as well as raising women's awareness of their rights, are some of the policy options.

Addressing the "gender divide" in access to ICT is another challenge. Without equal access to ICT women entrepreneurs risk becoming marginalized in the new technology driven economy. There is thus a call to better use the existing experiences of countries to address these two challenges. To this end, the report on *Women's Entrepreneurship: Access to financing and ICT* provides a number of good practices to be considered by Governments and other stakeholders.



Brigita Schmögnerová  
Executive Secretary  
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It includes papers presented at the Second UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs (*Geneva, 17-18 March 2003*), the UNECE/CEI Round Table: Women's Entrepreneurship in a Wider Europe at the CEI Economic Summit (*Warsaw, November 2003*) and the Regional Symposium on Mainstreaming Gender into Economic Policies, organized by UNECE and OSAGI/DAW (*Geneva, 17-18 January 2004*) as well as the results of research presented at the Women's Entrepreneurship track, co-chaired by UNECE, at the World Congress of the International Council for Small Business (*Belfast, 15-18 June 2003*). The assessment of needs draws on recommendations of the training course for women entrepreneurs organized in cooperation with UNECE by CEI, Instituto nazionale per il Commercio Estero (ICE), and the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (*Trieste, Vienna, 2002-2003*).

The report draws on the experience of the EBRD, Nordic Bank and the Council of Europe Bank as well as the work of international organizations: ILO: InFocus Programme on Boosting Employment through SMEs Development (SEED); UNDP/Bratislava Regional Gender Advisory Programme; UNIFEM Regional Programme for CIS countries (project in Kyrgyzstan) and OECD-LEED Programme.

The report benefited from inputs from the worldwide association of women entrepreneurs "FCEM" (*Les Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales*); the *National Women's Business Council (US)*; the *European Network to promote women's entrepreneurship (WES)*, especially its members from Finland and Sweden ("*NUTEK*"); *EUROCHAMBERS Network of Women Entrepreneurs* as well as the *Golda Meir Mount*

*Carmel International Training Center (Israel)*; *Women's World Banking (Spain)* and the global project to accelerate women's entrepreneurship "*Tsunami*" (based in Atlanta, Georgia, US).

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The publication was prepared by Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, Senior Social Affairs Officer, Coordinator of UNECE activities on women's entrepreneurship with the assistance of Gretchen Elias, consultant and contributions on data from the UNECE Statistical Division Team led by Angela Me. Substantive comments on the first draft were received from Larissa Kapitsa, former Director of the Technical Cooperation Unit, who launched the activities on women's entrepreneurship. Useful information was provided by the Regional Adviser on Entrepreneurship and SMEs, Antal Szabo. The report was prepared for print by Alison Mangin and Jean-Claude Petitjean, with the assistance of Amanda van Oostendorp.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CEB	Council of Europe Development Bank
CEI	Central European Initiative
CIPE	Centre for International Private Enterprise
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EDI	Electronic data interchange
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNP	Gross national product
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
ICA	International Cooperative Alliance
ICS-UNIDO	International Centre for Science and High Technology
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISP	Internet Service Provider
IT	Information Technology
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JSC	Joint stock company
MFI	Microfinance institution
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIB	Nordic Investment Bank
NWBC	National Women's Business Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSAGI	Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
TACIS	Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (of the EU)
UN/DESA	United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference for Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAP	Wireless Application Protocol
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society
WWB	Women's World Banking
WWF	Women's World Finance
YBI	Youth Business International

**OPENING STATEMENT BY MRS. BRIGITA SCHMÖGNEROVÁ,  
UNECE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, AT THE  
SECOND FORUM OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS  
Palais des Nations, Geneva, 17-18 March 2003**

I would like to welcome participants to the Second UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs. This is a particular pleasure for me, as I did not have the opportunity to meet with you at the First Forum in 2001.

Just to recall: The First Forum initiated the UNECE activities supporting Women Entrepreneurs. The Forum was held in October 2001 and gathered together about 300 participants from 30 countries. Many of them are present now. It has already had a positive impact on building networks at national, sub-regional and regional levels. One such example is the establishment, as a result of the Forum, of the All-Ukrainian Association of Women Entrepreneurs.

The idea of the Forum is to (i) promote a regional dialogue on Women's Entrepreneurship, (ii) exchange experiences; (iii) forge partnerships among governments and other stakeholders; (iv) facilitate the process of policy convergence based on best practices. But it also builds personal contacts and networks among women's business associations and individual entrepreneurs.

Building partnerships among stakeholders at national level is a key element in efficiently promoting Women's Entrepreneurship. So far, women's business associations and NGOs have been the main actors promoting Women's Entrepreneurship. Best practices already exist in a number of countries. We will have presentations of partnerships with governments from the United States of America and Finland as well as municipality initiatives from Provincia di Milano.

The UNECE Forum could also contribute to bridging the gap between Women Entrepreneurs within a Wider Europe, facilitating contacts between women entrepreneurs from accession and non-accession countries, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. We will listen to presentations of successful companies which use E.business.

The Second Forum of Women Entrepreneurs focuses on (i) best practices in improving women's access to financing and (ii) E-business. These two themes were decided upon as the most important at the First Forum of Women Entrepreneurs in 2001.

As a part of the Second Forum other activities will be organized: the opening of the Exhibition and Informal Networking Sessions and tomorrow a lunchtime meeting of the Presidents of Women Business Associations.

The Forum will also acknowledge best Women Entrepreneurs. Tomorrow the UNECE Award of Excellent Women Entrepreneurs will be given. These Awards are intended to promote role models for other women in the region and show women's contribution to economic growth and development of SMEs. The Awards will be given in six categories.

Entrepreneurship is a key element of growth and development prospects for all countries, and it is most relevant to transition countries. Countries which create good conditions for SME development have higher growth rates and better development prospects. Despite individual successful women, and MANY such women are in this room today, women's entrepreneurial potential remains largely untapped.

A recent UNECE publication on Women's Entrepreneurship pointed out that in eastern Europe and CIS countries for which we have data, men start their own business usually twice as often as women. This is the case of the Czech Republic where self-employed women have only 9% in total employment as compared to 18% for men.

Longer-term trends indicate that during the 1990s the gap between men and women's entrepreneurial activities widened in transition economies. This trend contrasts with trends in developed countries, especially the United States but also the United Kingdom, France and others where women-run companies are the driving force of the SME sector.

The situation of Women Entrepreneurs differs from country to country and depends on progress in the process of building a market economy. Accession countries in most cases (if I exclude the agricultural sector) do better than other economies in transition. The very low level of entrepreneurial activities in most countries in central Asia and in the Caucasus is an indicator of slow progress in building market economies.

Women face not only general barriers for SMEs (weak institutional support to SMEs, lack of access to credit) but also gender specific barriers – such as lack of collateral due to uneven sharing of privatisation gains, lack of networks and traditional views on women's roles. They have greater difficulty in obtaining credit, finding business partners, getting information on business opportunities.

The gender gap in Women's Entrepreneurship is bad economic policy for a country. But it should also be seen in the context of United Nations principles of gender equality. UNECE concerns for Women Entrepreneurs reflect core United Nations values reflected in the Millennium Declaration and other United Nations documents, especially the Beijing Platform for Action and the agreed conclusions from the Regional Preparatory Meeting on the 2000 Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform, which was organized by UNECE in January 2000.

A major conclusion in the area of economy relates to increasing employment opportunities through fostering women's access to self-employment and entrepreneurship. This conclusion, adopted by all UNECE member States, is the basis for the UNECE programme on Women's Entrepreneurship, part of which is the Forum of Women Entrepreneurs.

The UNECE programme aims at collecting data and analyzing the situation of Women Entrepreneurs, raising awareness of issues and problems, and formulating policy recommendations to assist governments in implementing their commitments expressed in the Beijing declaration in the area of economy.

The key elements of the programme are: The Regional Forum of Women Entrepreneurs, the

virtual Gallery of Excellent Women Entrepreneurs, the on-line network of Women Business Associations, and the Team of Specialists on Women's Entrepreneurship.

The first UNECE publication on trends and key problems faced by women entrepreneurs has just been issued and is based on the materials of the First Forum of Women Entrepreneurs and meetings of the Team of Specialists.

UNECE develops the programmes in cooperation with UNDP, UNIFEM, ILO, other United Nations organizations and international organizations, such as ITU, OECD, as well as sub-regional organizations especially the Central European Initiative (CEI). I would like to welcome the representatives of all these organizations. We also develop cooperation with associations of small businesses –such as WASME, which is represented at our Forum today and the International Council of Small Business (ICSM), where UNECE is a co-chair of the Women's Entrepreneurship track at the Annual ICSM Conference (Belfast, June 2003).

The cooperation with CEI is especially close – UNECE co-organizes each year a Round Table session on Women's Entrepreneurship at the CEI Economic Summits, such as in Skopje (2001) and at the forthcoming Summit in Warsaw (November 2003).

In conclusion I would like to wish you success in your deliberations and express the wish that the Second Forum of Women Entrepreneurs will be a contribution to further strengthening and widening the economic and social development of our societies.

Thank you.



## OVERVIEW

### MAKING SELF-EMPLOYMENT AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN

by Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, UNECE

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Self-employment and entrepreneurship are increasingly important for women as a way to ensure income from work in the context of declining job security and flexibilization of work contracts across the UNECE region.

Women experience more difficulties than men in getting decent jobs as employees in most countries, especially in Eastern Europe and the CIS. This is due to discriminatory practices, especially in the private sector, and gender barriers embodied in social norms and existing labour market institutions. Many women are turning to self-employment and small businesses as a means of economic survival.

A general lack of consistent data and research on self-employment, and in particular gender-disaggregated data, means that we know little about women's entrepreneurship. The concept of "self-employment" is a broad term that incorporates a wide range of activities, from engaging in small-scale micro-entrepreneurship, often in the informal economy, to family businesses, to managing large companies in high-tech sectors and in manufacturing, each with its own set of challenges and constraints. A substantial number of women entrepreneurs are also own account workers, especially in agriculture.

Within this diverse group of women entrepreneurs, obtaining information about those most in need of support, such as low income, rural, or home-based entrepreneurs, is particularly problematic. This is compounded by the fact that these groups of women are typically politically marginalized and have little access to platforms to advocate their own needs.

Although women face common challenges related to starting and building up their businesses, their experiences vary. Their needs are shaped by the business, policy, and cultural environment.

Two challenges for women entrepreneurs in the UNECE region, regardless of their individual situations, are the need for better access to financing and to ICT. Good practices of initiatives of Governments, civil society as well as business and international communities already exist in many countries. Adapting a successful policy from one context to another expands policy options but requires the evaluation of factors which contributed to the original success.

#### Progress and perspectives across the region

Trends from selected countries point at the rapid growth of women entrepreneurs. Progress has, however, been uneven by country and sub-region. Likewise, policy responses to the call to promote women's entrepreneurship have been mixed.

The **United States** and **Canada** are examples of countries with well-developed policy and institutional structures supporting women's entrepreneurship. In both countries, a range of government actions and public/private partnership initiatives over the past several decades has corresponded with an explosion in the number of women starting businesses. Still, evidence suggests that women continue to face gender-based barriers in access to financing, information, and networks. (*Weeks; St-Onge*)

Women business owners in **Southeast Europe** face markedly different conditions. Due to the combined effects of economic transition and a decade of war and conflict, efforts in these countries to develop new local and national institutions to support small enterprises in a free market system are still in the early stages. Grassroots women's organizations (NGOs) and women's business associations (WBAs) have taken the lead across much of the region by providing women entrepreneurs with services and resources and advocating their

**Box 1****Common experiences, common needs:  
women's entrepreneurship worldwide**

When asked about their biggest concerns in running their businesses, women all over the world identify five major issues. The Centre for Women's Business Research in the United States conducted research in over a half a dozen countries and found that women share concerns about the following five challenges:

- ❖ **Access to information:** Women want better access to education, training, and counselling.
- ❖ **Access to capital:** Access to capital is a very important issue for many women business owners, who often lack formal education in financial matters and who may face gender-based barriers to accessing financing.
- ❖ **Access to markets:** Women want better access to existing ways of sharing information about programmes and services that are available to all businesses, such as government procurement and corporate purchasing opportunities, as well as opportunities for international trade.
- ❖ **Access to networks:** Women want full access to business networks such as industry-specific and general business associations.
- ❖ **Validation:** Women want to be treated seriously as business owners.

If these five areas are addressed by those involved in business development issues (be they government agencies, NGOs, large corporations, or business associations), then women's business ownership will not only continue to grow, but will thrive even more strongly. Unleashed and unfettered, women's entrepreneurship can provide the fuel for economic growth and opportunity for communities around the world.

*Source: "Common Experiences, Common Needs: Lessons for Women's Entrepreneurial Development," a publication of the Centre for Women's Business Research, based in Washington, DC, USA.*

interests at the policy level. Critical barriers include inequalities in property rights and the influence of traditional gender roles. (*Elias; Gospic*)

The **CIS countries** exhibit similar trends and problems. Industrial-sector production has shrunk considerably in these countries, and with it employment and economic growth. The sharp decline of industrial production of two large enterprises in Azerbaijan illustrates the downturn typical of many industrial complexes in CIS countries. The Business Polygon project shows how this could be turned into opportunity (*Safarova*). Still, tremendous diversity exists across CIS countries as shown by a recent survey of women entrepreneurs in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. (*Welter et al*). In all countries, however, a strong gender bias of the privatisation process had affected women's opportunities. In Georgia, only two out of 164 enterprises privatised in petroleum materials sector went to women. And women head only three out of 100 large enterprises. (*Jashi*). Issues such as property rights and traditional cultural norms are highlighted as key barriers for

women in Kyrgyzstan (*Profile 4: Baimambetova*) as well as all many other CIS countries.

These examples reflect common concerns about the challenges women face in running their businesses. They typically cite access to finance, access to information, access to markets, and access to networks as their chief concerns. (*Box 1*). These concerns are also shared by male owners of small and micro-enterprises. But women have a *gender-specific* dimension determined by social and cultural norms and, more significantly, the structural inequalities created by these norms as reflected by the unequal division of reproductive labour, discriminatory practices, and psychological barriers due to the socialization of these roles.<sup>1</sup> Such inequalities intensify the effects of common challenges for SMEs and create additional, gender-specific barriers.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, see Kantor, 2000; ILO, 1998; OECD 2001. For a discussion of barriers faced by SMEs in general, see Levitsky, 1996.

At the same time, a comparison of women's entrepreneurship across these three groups of countries highlights the diverse ways in which women may experience common challenges. While women in the United States and the United Kingdom have difficulties accessing finance because they are not taken seriously in the male-dominated banking world, many problems of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Europe and CIS countries may be more closely related to the weakness of financial institutions and in many countries, traditional views about property rights.

Diversity exists among women's experiences within countries as well, with factors such as a woman's educational and socio-economic background, geographical location, and the sector of activities. In particular the experiences of rural and urban women entrepreneurs can differ dramatically. Effective policies have to take into consideration individual experiences as well as the broader economic and cultural environment in a particular country.

### **Box 2**

#### **Financing women entrepreneurs: a global challenge**

*The issue of women's access to finance, and some policy and programmatic responses in OECD countries*

The challenges that women face in accessing finance.

- ❖ Women often have smaller amounts of personal capital available for start up
- ❖ Women have a greater need for external funding, yet have difficulty obtaining such funding
- ❖ Women lack knowledge about the available options, and the costs of getting this information (measured in money, time, energy) may be high due to family responsibilities
- ❖ Women may face explicit or implicit (structural) gender discrimination
- ❖ Banks may have inaccurate perceptions of women's borrowing and entrepreneurial behaviour
- ❖ Banks often rely on personal profiles and track records in reviewing loan applications
- ❖ Women may be asked to pay a higher interest rate or provide higher guarantees

A range of strategies can be used to address these challenges, such as:

- ❖ Special credit funds
- ❖ Mentoring or advisory services
- ❖ Development of ties with public authorities, business community, and networks
- ❖ Flexible time schedules
- ❖ Evaluation of loan applications based on business potential rather than past track record
- ❖ Strategies to change women entrepreneurs' self perceptions
- ❖ Strategies to promote a positive image of women entrepreneurs

Various actors can play a role in facilitating women's access to finance, such as:

- ❖ International financial institutions (IADB, WWB)
- ❖ Public funds providing loans at preferential rates (Kera ltd. Loans, Finland)
- ❖ Guarantee funds (Fonds de Garantie pour la Création, la reprise, ou le développement d'entreprises à l'Initiative des Femmes, France)
- ❖ Microcredit institutions (Network credit, Norway; Business loans for women, Sweden;)
- ❖ Private banks (West Pack Bank, Australia; Bank of Ireland)
- ❖ Venture capital funds (Women Growth Equity Fund, USA)
- ❖ NGOs (Springboard)
- ❖ Business angels (WomenAngels.net, Seraph Capital Forum)
- ❖ Cooperatives (Coopératives de credit de Saskatoon, Canada)
- ❖ Conditional seed grants (Trickle Up)

*Source: Dina Ionescu, former Administrator, LEED Programme, OECD. Presentation at the Second UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs, [www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm](http://www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm).*

### **Innovative schemes and partnerships in financing**

Access to finance is a critical barrier for women entrepreneurs, especially small and micro-entrepreneurs. The Monterrey Consensus highlights the role played by such enterprises in strategies aimed to foster economic growth, reduce unemployment, facilitate social cohesion, and fight poverty.

Needs for financing depend on a variety of factors, such as the economic conditions in the area where she lives, personal and professional background and entrepreneurial goals. Thus a woman running a micro-enterprise in rural Kazakhstan and a woman business owner in an urban area of Zagreb face very different financing challenges (*Zakić; and Profile 3: Solovyova*). The diversity of women's credit needs requires flexibility when choosing strategies to address these needs.

Commercial banks are usually wary of small businesses because of the perception that SMEs are high risk borrowers. Women, who typically lack collateral, are regarded as particularly risky in most countries in the UNECE region. Weak financial systems supporting SMEs make targeting financial services to women entrepreneurs even more difficult.

#### **Major stakeholders**

Governments, financial institutions, and civil society have roles to play in improving women's access to finance.

**Government-led initiatives** have become more frequent in recent years, but they are still not very common. Canada and the United States offer some good practices. Through the Small Business Administration, the Office of Women's Business Ownership, and other federal-level institutions, the US Government provides women entrepreneurs with information and assistance in accessing both public and private sources of finance. It also provides funding to Women's Business Centres around the nation, many of which include micro-loans or seed money among their services. There are also good practices from Finland, Israel (*Profile 5: Mazal*) as well as Poland and Slovenia, where government support is developed in partnership with

women's business association and other partners (*Box 3*). Innovative ways to improve women's access to financing are also being developed by municipalities and local governments. In addition to information services and loans, another common approach is the development of publicly financed guarantee funds to help business owners who lack collateral to access private sector loans.

**Civil society-led initiatives** offer diversified schemes to improve women's access to financing. Some have established alternative sources of finance, cooperative banks, micro-finance schemes and solidarity lending programmes. Others offer programmes designed to provide women with the tools and resources they need to gain access to the formal financial sector, such as training and counselling services, or partnership arrangements with banks. Still others have implemented advocacy projects to raise awareness about the structural factors that contribute to women's difficulties in accessing finance, such as gender inequality in accessing property ownership and in the distribution of assets.

**Regional development banks**, such as EBRD, are latecomers to the field of financing small enterprise, having historically focused their lending programmes on large-scale infrastructure projects. However, these institutions are also refocusing their efforts to place greater emphasis on programmes that target small enterprise and entrepreneurship. Some regional banks have developed special programmes for women entrepreneurs.

#### **Good practice strategies**

Good practices are based on improving access to existing sources of financing; developing targeted financial tools for women entrepreneurs and addressing the structural and cultural barriers.

*Improving access to existing sources of finance.* Examples include the proposed loan guarantee funds for SMEs in Poland (*Raciniowska*), WWB (Women's World Banking) Spain's programmes for helping women who lack collateral access bank loans (*Berggen*), and the EBRD's lending packages targeting SMEs (*Doyle*). Other approaches focus on providing women entrepreneurs with information, counselling, and guidance to ensure that they are aware of existing resources and to help them navigate the loan application process. Some



**Box 3****Slovenia's Programme for Women's Professional Promotion**

Slovenia's National Employment Action Programme includes a "Programme for Women's Professional Promotion" that focuses on providing women with new employment possibilities, and in particular on opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The main components of the programme are the META information centre based in Ljubljana, and individual Women's Enterprise Promoters located in different regions around the country. The project is financially supported by the Government and is implemented by the Slovenian Small Business Development Centre in partnership with the women's business association *GIZ Podjetnost*. The META information centre provides information, advice, and other self-employment related resources on-site, via a toll-free Business Counselling Switchboard, and on its website. Web-based services also include networking opportunities with other self-employed women in Slovenia, Stability Pact countries, and other European countries. As of 2003, 28 Women's Enterprise Promoters had been designated in different municipalities around the country. They provide a range of services tailored to the needs of women in their communities, targeting in particular unemployed women, single mothers, and women with less education. Their responsibilities include facilitating networking opportunities, assisting women with accessing information about business start-up, and providing motivational workshops and workshops in areas such as handicraft production, farm tourism, and computer skills. In 2002, over 2600 women participated in these workshops.

*Source: Marta Turk, President GIZ Podjednost and chair, Commission for Economy and Business, Slovenia, presentation at the Second UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs, [www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm](http://www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm). and [www.podjetnost.org](http://www.podjetnost.org), [www.pcmg.si](http://www.pcmg.si).*

programmes also work directly with the staff of financial institutions to educate them about women's financing needs and help them to tailor their services and financial tools to the needs of women entrepreneurs.

*Developing targeted financial tools for women entrepreneurs.* Examples include the pilot project of the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) and the Council of Europe Bank (COB) for the Baltic States (*Hellen and Seppälä*) as well as the loan package provided by the Finnish government-funded lending agency Finnvera in (*Profile 1: Laine-Kangas*). The Women's Cooperative Bank, a non profit lending institution in Cyprus, prioritizes women in its mission, but does not exclusively target women in its services (*Box 4*). These different projects also demonstrate the range of possibilities for the involvement of public, private, and non-profit lending institutions, as well as for handling the issue of targeting.

*Addressing the structural and cultural disparities to overcome difficulties in accessing finance.* Examples include the efforts of NGOs in Serbia and

Kyrgyzstan to raise awareness about women's property rights and land ownership rights, in order to change patterns of ownership. Similarly, the *Pink Card* project of the Province of Milan educates women about the importance of establishing a credit history and managing their personal finances (*Grecchi*). Whether on a structural level, by lobbying for reforms of the legal system and for changes in traditional practices, or on an individual level, by raising women's awareness about asset ownership and financial management, this type of approach works to change the unequal patterns of ownership that put women at a disadvantage when seeking financing.

**Access to ICT: Opportunities and challenges**

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have enormous potential as a tool to enhance women's economic, political, and social empowerment. Women entrepreneurs in particular can benefit from these to improve their access to information and networks and to increase the competitiveness and market outreach of their businesses.

**Box 4****The Women's Cooperative Bank in Cyprus**

*A non-profit financial institution that promotes women's entrepreneurship through loan services and other activities*

In October 2000, 350 women in Cyprus came together to tackle the problem of women entrepreneurs' limited access to financial resources in this country. Their solution: the formation of the Women's Cooperative Bank, a non-profit lending institution governed by a volunteer board of directors including banking experts, business owners, and academics. The Bank was officially founded in January 2001 in Larnaca, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, with the goal of providing more flexible financing terms to business owners.

Although it serves women and men alike, the bank has a particular interest in enhancing women's entrepreneurial activity. Towards this end, the bank has initiated research on women-owned businesses in Cyprus and their financing needs, and is working with the Cypriot government to design programmes tailored to these needs. For example, the bank is exploring the possibility of creating a business incubator for women's start up companies. It also plans to offer seminars and workshops that support women-owned businesses and promote their economic advancement.

*Source: Artemis Toumazi, President, Women's Cooperative Bank, Cyprus. Presentation at the Second UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs, [www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm](http://www.unece.org/ie/enterp/women/program.htm).*

At the same time, a "gender divide" is already apparent within the "digital divide". Pre-existing inequalities and unequal power relations "contribute to differential access, participation, and treatment for men and women" in the area of ICT.<sup>2</sup> A "gender neutral" approach to ICT decision-making will only intensify these existing differences in women's and men's access to ICT. Mainstreaming gender aspects into ICT policy debates and decision-making processes is necessary to ensure adequate access to and utilization of ICT by women entrepreneurs.

As in access to financing and for similar reasons, women's access to ICT varies considerably among and within countries in the UNECE region. Women in EU countries, particularly in Scandinavia, are the most likely to have adequate access to ICT, although they still lag behind men in many aspects of ICT use. In most transition countries, although aggregate ICT use rates are increasing rapidly in many countries, particularly Estonia, a considerable gender gap in ICT access persists. The CIS countries have the lowest levels of ICT use and availability in the UNECE region. Across the region, younger women and women in urban areas

have greater access than older women and those in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> The gender gap in ICT in many countries may not be easy to close, despite good levels of women's education. Disproportionately affected by job cuts and unemployment, women are less likely to be able to afford the costs of accessing and investing in new technologies. And a resurgence of traditional attitudes about gender roles has increased women's workload within the family, leaving them with less time to devote to learning new skills, and has perpetuated a perception of technology as a "male" domain.

**Major stakeholders**

There are a variety of stakeholders in the ICT area, with a strong role of the private sector. Many countries in the region, particularly in Eastern Europe and the CIS, are just beginning a policy debate on social implications of the burgeoning information society. So far this discussion has largely been dominated by the "technical approach" with its emphasis on physical infrastructure. The regional discussion on building an Information Society within the WSIS process provides a good framework to incorporate gender issues from the

<sup>2</sup> ITU website <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/gender/GenderWSIS/>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality, 2002

outset. In this regard, the inclusion of specific wording about gender equality in the *Bucharest Declaration* adopted at the *Pan-European Preparatory Ministerial Conference for WSIS* (2002) could serve as a good practice (Box 20).

Although issues of gender and ICT are still new for most civil society initiatives in the UNECE region, many NGOs are active in this area. International organizations, such as UNDP and UNIFEM, have already included these issues in their work programmes.

### **Potential strategies**

Improving access to ICT for women requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses both the immediate barriers preventing women's access to ICT, as well as the underlying structural forces creating these barriers.

*Improving immediate access to ICT technology.* This could be done by addressing the immediate barriers that prevent women from investing in ICT technology and training. There are many examples,

such as the work of the Serbian NGO *Jednake Mogucnosti* which, together with its governmental and private sector partners, brings computer equipment to women teachers in rural areas. Some programmes directly target women entrepreneurs through the provision of grants to defray the costs of investing in business-related technologies, or the development of special ICT training programmes.

*Longer-term strategies addressing the cultural and social barriers.* This requires raising awareness, building self-confidence and changing stereotypes related to "male" and "female" education profile and jobs. By promoting the ICT field as not only a "male domain" and encouraging women to take leadership roles in technology-intensive businesses, such strategies will enable women to take advantage of the entrepreneurial opportunities presented by ICT and to play an active role in this sector. Examples include the UNECE Entrepreneur of the Year Award, which highlights the achievements of successful women in the ICT sector (Boxes 5 and 18).

#### **Box 5**

#### **Recognizing women's achievements: the UNECE Excellent Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Award**

The UNECE award was established to provide role models and recognize the contribution of women entrepreneurs to the economic development and social progress of their countries. For the 2002 competition, 41 nominees from 20 countries were submitted as candidates for awards in six categories. The winners of UNECE Excellent Women Entrepreneur 2002 were:

<i>Best Start Up:</i>	<b>Israilova Ratkan</b> , Chairperson of "Kairat Bol" credit union in Kyrgyzstan
<i>Most Innovative:</i>	<b>Feryal Menemenli</b> , Owner and Chair of the Board of the Board of Doğa Bitkisel Ürünler Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş., Istanbul Turkey
<i>Best ICT Entrepreneur:</i>	<b>Sanja Penić</b> , Manager of Diger a d.o.o. Croatia
<i>Best Craft Entrepreneur:</i> (two awards)	<b>Agamirzoeva Fatima Ayibkhan</b> , President and owner of Aygun, Azerbaijan <b>Salimova Makhfuza Hamidovna</b> , Managing Director and Owner of Sadbard company, Uzbekistan
<i>Best Entrepreneur Facing a Disability:</i>	<b>Leona Szy</b> , Owner and Managing Director of Kiskapu, Ltd., Hungary
<i>Best Environmental Entrepreneur (3Rs):</i>	<b>Leonina Doromian</b> , Manager and Owner of SC Cânepa Româneasca, Romania

Source: <http://www.unece.org/indust/sme/candidates.htm>

### Learning from good practice

Good practices developed in response to concerns in particular countries may or may not be useful elsewhere. The following are some context-based factors that should be considered when adapting successful practices from one location to another:

**Policy goals and objectives.** The focus of a particular policy is shaped in part by the broader policy environment in which it operates. In the European Union, where unemployment is a chief policy concern, women's self-employment is typically situated within broader strategies to combat unemployment, which differs from other approaches (Box 4).

**The availability of resources.** Choices about policy design are linked to resources (human capital, physical, institutional, financial infrastructure). Many initiatives based in developed market economies have as their goal improving women's integration into an *already well functioning* financial system. But in Southeast Europe, where the financial institutional framework is still weak and underdeveloped, strategies that focus on developing *alternative sources* of financing might be more relevant.

**The funding environment.** Policies designed for an environment where governments rely on the local tax base for their funding may differ in scope and design from those where governments rely heavily on international donor funding. Adapting a policy to a new environment with different funding constraints will require corresponding adjustments in policy design. Several EU countries promote women's self-employment through active labour market policies implemented by public employment services. But in CIS countries, lack of funding is an important constraint affecting the capacity of these institutions to provide such services.

**The roles of stakeholders.** Stakeholders in the public, private, and non profit sectors can and do take diverse roles. The diversity seen in countries in the UNECE region suggests that there is no single answer as to who should implement or fund initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship. Rather, this depends on the underlying reasons for intervening, on the capacities of different economic and political institutions, and on public perceptions

and role of these institutions. Recent initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship in Canada emerged out of the private financial sector, in part because of key support from several women bankers. And in Southeast Europe, women's NGOs have developed extensive tools, as well as research, lobbying, and advocacy capabilities, to address women's economic needs.

**The impetus for the policy and its implementation process:** The conditions under which a policy is created and implemented are important. The nation-wide push for legislation and research promoting women's entrepreneurship in the US in the 1970s grew out of the momentum of the women's movement and the civil rights movement. Similarly, the emergence of Local Enterprise Agencies (LEAs) in the United Kingdom was a "bottom-up", grassroots phenomenon that started in the private sector as a response to locally defined needs and problems.<sup>4</sup> Reproducing the success in other countries via "top-down" approaches, without acknowledging the key role of the grassroots impetus, may not work.

### Key challenges and policy recommendations

There are three key policy challenges:

- ❖ How to effectively identify and reach self-employed women.
- ❖ How to integrate a gender perspective into relevant policy areas.
- ❖ How to coordinate the efforts of different stakeholders.

#### Policy recommendations

- Developing regularly collected data, information and research on self-employed women, which could serve as base to design policies.
- Incorporating the needs of the most vulnerable groups of self-employed women into support measures (rural women, home-based entrepreneurs and self-employed women in informal sector). Measures could include: targeted policies; assistance in mainstreaming their concerns into larger support networks and resources, such as regional coalitions of informal workers, also inclusion of organizations representing self-employed women in the informal sector into policy discussions.

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<sup>4</sup> Gibb and Haas, 1996

**Box 6****Different approaches and rationale for supporting women's entrepreneurship**

Approaches and rationale for supporting women's self-employment and entrepreneurship differ. The *growth approach* emphasizes women as an untapped source of growth for the economy as a whole. The *'job creation'* rationale, links the support to women's entrepreneurship to broader strategies to combat unemployment. The *poverty alleviation* rationale emphasizes self-employment as an economic survival tool for poor women and their families. Efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship stem also from a commitment to *women's empowerment*.

These rationales reflect different policy priorities and can lead to different approaches in policy implementation. When each stakeholder focuses narrowly on one approach, without coordinating its efforts with those of others, gaps can emerge, resulting in policies that are not effective. Active labour market policies in the EU encourage self-employment largely based on the *'job creation'* rationale, but these programmes are often under utilized by women. US and Canadian approaches based on the *'economic growth'* rationale risk to focus on formal sector entrepreneurs with larger enterprises as opposed to low income micro-entrepreneurs. In contrast, many NGO-based programmes to support women's self employment target poor and vulnerable women and are typically based on *'poverty alleviation'* or *'empowerment'* approach, such as in countries of Southeast Europe and CIS countries. But without strong linkages to the government decision-makers who set the economic policy agenda, such programmes risk to further isolate poor and marginalized women, instead of helping them to integrate into larger economic system.

*Source: UNECE paper for UNECE/OSAGI Regional Symposium on mainstreaming gender into economic policies (2004); OECD Small and Medium Enterprise Outlook: Proceedings of Second OECD Conference on Women Entrepreneurs; Kantor, 2000.*

- Developing an approach based on the multiple rationales and balancing needs of different groups of self-employed women. Such an approach would combine: (i) targeted programmes that improve women's immediate access to resources (such as credit lines, micro finance, access to training and services); (ii) programmes designed to promote self-employed women in the wider society and to increase their visibility in the business and policy communities (such as achievement awards, procurement policies, public awareness campaigns); (iii) gender mainstreaming to address underlying structural barriers and their manifestation in the labour market, tax, and family and social policies.
- Mainstreaming a gender sensitive approach to SME policy through identifying gender specific barriers and broadening the scope of policies to reflect the characteristics, constraints and needs of women-owned enterprises.
- Ensuring that SME policy addresses gender-based constraints faced by women, and in particular those related to the unequal division of household and family labour. One example would be to provide child care and health care benefits in programmes that provide assistance to self-employment.
- Integrating the efforts of different stakeholders through:
  - Building formal linkages and lines of communication between government institutions responsible for SME policy and national gender machineries;
  - Facilitating opportunities for direct communication and on-going dialogue between government actors and civil society stakeholders such as women's NGOs and women's business associations (WBA)
  - Developing and strengthening linkages among stakeholders who work directly with self-employed women at the local level by encouraging partnerships and dialogue among chambers of commerce, local branches of public employment services, women's NGOs, and WBAs.

**Box 7****Statistics on women's entrepreneurship: problems in data collection**

Designing effective programmes and policies to promote women's entrepreneurship requires information about women entrepreneurs: who they are, what kinds of businesses they run, and how they are faring compared to men. Such information is not always easy to come by. And the data that is available often suffers from several problems, most importantly a *lack of standard definitions* and a *lack of consistency among available data sources*.

**Lack of a common framework for defining *entrepreneurs* and *entrepreneurship*.** An entrepreneur may be defined as the owner or manager of an enterprise, its executive director, or a member of its managing board. Self-employed people are also commonly considered to be entrepreneurs, but not all data sources include self-employment in their definition of entrepreneurship. And self-employment itself can be defined in multiple ways according to the different goals of various sources. For example, not all countries in the UNECE region use the standard guidelines of the International Labour Organization (ILO) for defining self-employment. And for countries where a large part of the labour force is engaged in agriculture, definitions that include agricultural self-employment will overestimate entrepreneurial activity.

**No single source of data on entrepreneurs, and wide variation in the available data sources.** The most common sources are household surveys (usually labour force surveys), enterprise surveys, and official registers of enterprises. But each of these data sources uses different categories when collecting information, and each also focuses on a different aspect of entrepreneurship. The resulting data is therefore not always comparable.

- ❖ *Household-based data sources* are a good source of information on self-employment, entrepreneurs' personal characteristics, and very small or unregistered entrepreneurial activity. They are also most likely to have gender-disaggregated information on entrepreneurs. But they may not yield good data about the enterprise itself.
- ❖ *Enterprise surveys and registers* are less likely to collect information about the sex of the owner or manager. They may only include information on certain types of firms. For example, very small firms or firms in certain sectors may be excluded. And in countries with a large informal economy, official registers are unlikely to provide an accurate picture of total entrepreneurial activity.

These problems create difficulties in comparing statistics on entrepreneurship across countries, and even among different data sources within countries. While these difficulties exist in all countries across the UNECE region, they are particularly pronounced in transition countries for several reasons. Governments of these countries often lack funding for regular household surveys, meaning that data is collected less frequently and on a smaller scale. Reliable non-government sources of data are less available. And the size of the informal economy in many of these countries makes data collection through official enterprise registers unreliable.

These data collection issues have several implications. First, when using or comparing statistics on entrepreneurship it is important to take into account *the source of the data* and *what definition for entrepreneurship was used*. Second, regional and national efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship must include work to establish a standard framework for defining entrepreneurship and a common set of indicators to measure entrepreneurship.

*Source: Giovannelli, Gunnsteinsdottir, and Me, 2003.*