



**Economic and Social  
Council**

Distr.  
GENERAL

OPA/AC.21/6  
10 December 2001

Original: ENGLISH

---

**ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE**

COORDINATING UNIT FOR OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES

**First UNECE Forum of Women-Entrepreneurs**

Geneva, 22 October 2001

**FINAL REPORT**

**Introduction**

Fostering women's entrepreneurship was adopted by the member States as one of strategic directions for action in the economic area at the UNECE Regional Preparatory Meeting on the 2000 Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, held on 19-21 January 2000, Geneva (E/ECE/RW.2/2000/7).

To assist member States in implementing activities aiming at promoting women's entrepreneurship the UNECE Coordinating Unit for Operational Activities organized the First UNECE Forum of Women-Entrepreneurs. It was held on 22 October 2001 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The Forum drew on the expertise of the UNECE Coordinating Unit for Operational Activities in this area, especially on that of its Regional Advisers.

Since 1999, a number of meetings on women's entrepreneurship took place, such as the Brjuni Conference, organized jointly with OECD, CEI and the Croatian Government (1999), and sub-regional workshops, organized in cooperation with CEI and BSEC (2000-2001).

The UNECE Gallery of Excellent Women Entrepreneurs was established last year and includes profiles of 150 successful women-entrepreneurs from transition countries. Many women from the Gallery met for the first time at the First UNECE Forum of Women-Entrepreneurs.

In 2000, the UNECE Working Party on Industry and Enterprise Development decided to establish a Team of Specialists on Women's Entrepreneurship, which would have its first meeting on 12 and 15 February 2002.

## Attendance

The Forum was attended by more than 300 participants from 39 countries. The majority of participants were women-entrepreneurs and representatives of women's business associations from countries in transition of Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus. The Forum was also attended by experts, representatives of Governments and international organizations, such as ILO, ITU, UNIDO and UNCTAD.

## Context and purpose of the Forum

Women-headed companies are the most dynamic market segment in many UNECE member countries creating new jobs and contributing to economic growth. In the United States, there are 8.5 million women-owned businesses, which account for over one third of all businesses and employ one out of four workers. In the United Kingdom, women start up one in four new businesses. Women-entrepreneurs play also an important role in the development of the private sector in Eastern Europe and in the CIS. In Hungary, women started up more than 40 per cent of new businesses between 1990-1996. In Poland, the number of self-employed women, working outside agriculture, has quadrupled since 1985.

Full potential of women's entrepreneurship, however, still remains untapped. In many transition countries, the overall environment, supporting the SME development, is weak. Women face also gender specific barriers due to the traditional views on gender roles and uneven sharing of family responsibilities.

The main purpose of the Forum was to create a regional platform for women- entrepreneurs and women's business associations to:

- discuss key issues and identify best practices;
- establish new business and professional contacts;
- strengthen and expand links among women's business associations;
- develop strategic directions for policies and programmes at the national, sub-regional and regional levels; and
- propose recommendations for the UNECE programmes and activities to be implemented with all interested partners.

## Thematic debate

Three major themes were discussed at the Forum: personal experiences of successful women-entrepreneurs, the role of professional and business networks among women-entrepreneurs, and the access to new technologies and markets (Annex I - Programme of the Forum).

The debate was based on the following documents prepared by the UNECE secretariat: *Information Notice* (OPA/AC.21/1); *Connecting SMEs Owned and Led by Women to the Global Digital Economy: A Proposal for Action* (OPA/AC.21/2); *UNECE Euro-Asian Foundation of Women-Entrepreneurs* (OPA/AC.21/3), *Women-Entrepreneurs of the Year* (OPA/AC.21/4), and *Building Regional Networks Among Women-Entrepreneurs* (OPA/AC/21.5). All documents are available in English and in Russian at the UNECE website ([www.unece.org](http://www.unece.org)).

## **Similarity and diversity of personal experiences**

The Forum opened with presentations of successful women-entrepreneurs from Switzerland (watches), Turkey (pharmaceuticals), Poland (leather goods), and Kyrgyzstan (credit union). Their stories highlighted the role of a vision, commitment and hard work in achieving success in starting up and developing their companies. Despite large differences in the economic situation in their countries and areas of activities, the existence of gender specific barriers was stressed. These barriers include: limited access to information, business networks and collateral as well as the traditional attitudes towards the gender role and unfavourable social climate.

Women's advantages and disadvantages in starting up own business were discussed. The advantages included such elements as, "I am full of energy"; "I have a dream"; "I am able to work 16 hours a day"; "I take education seriously". The disadvantages – "I am a women"; "I have no money"; "I am over 50". There was, however, underlined that taking a risk is the only way to success, often through a "step-by-step" approach. Social aspects, characteristic for women's entrepreneurship (creating jobs for other women, volunteer work) were also mentioned.

The participants of the Forum agreed that in many countries, there was a lack of data and basic information on the situation of women-entrepreneurs.

## **The role of professional and business networks**

The role of women's business associations and other NGOs in supporting women's entrepreneurship was underlined. The experience of women's business associations from Croatia, Georgia, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, and Slovenia was presented. It was pointed out that networks help to build personal contacts, share experiences and get encouragement, when business goes down. They support women-entrepreneurs through providing:

- Information and contacts;
- Customized training in managerial skills and marketing;
- Better access to credit and financing; and
- Advice how to face difficulties, including "corruption, bureaucracy and organized crime".

It was mentioned that women's business associations aim also at economic empowerment, advocacy for equal rights and changing the traditional views on women in a society. Thus, they are important actors in promoting and ensuring gender equality in the emerging market-oriented societies. This role was highlighted in the context of the transition process, where market institutions are still "under construction", especially in the SME sector, which so far got little attention at the policy-making level in many transition countries.

Despite positive developments, especially seen in countries of Central Europe, there was an agreement that networks are not sufficiently developed in many countries. National and sub-regional networks, which are already in place, have to be strengthened and expanded into region-wide and global structures.

## **Access to new technologies and markets**

It was pointed out that progress in information and communication technologies (ICT) had created unprecedented opportunities and strategic advantages for small businesses. They could greatly facilitate the process of internationalization of women-headed companies, which usually are smaller than men-run companies and have little experience and contacts. Access to ICT, especially e-commerce, was seen as a condition to benefit from globalization. The Internet, for example, is assumed to enable small businesses to:

- access global databases for information;
- communicate with customers and suppliers regardless of time and place;
- advertise to the global audience; and
- conduct financial transactions in cyber space, thus reducing the costs of doing business.

Positive trends such as a growing number of women online in the United States and other western countries were mentioned (women are over 50% of all internet users in the USA). It was stressed, however, that this may not be true for transition countries. It was pointed out that privatization resulted in the redistribution of public assets in favour of men, leaving women with less collateral to use in getting financial resources, which could be used to buy PC and other equipment. Women have also less time to learn and worst access to training opportunities on how to utilize ICT technologies for exploring and/or expanding their businesses.

Significant potential of women in the UNECE region to capture the economic benefits of new technologies was underlined. They are well-educated and are also relatively close to the major world markets. There was a call for more attention to the gender aspects of the digital divide and gender sensitive policies, and for a public support to promote e-learning and e-commerce. It was proposed that efforts in this regard should be undertaken by Governments as well as by the UNECE and other international organizations. Improvement of the access to the ICT was considered especially important for women-entrepreneurs from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

## **Conclusions and proposals for action**

The Forum concluded that, despite positive trends, the potential of women's entrepreneurship still remains untapped. In many transition countries, the overall environment for the SME development is weak and, in addition, women face gender specific barriers induced by traditional views on women's role in a society. There was an agreement that more support to women-entrepreneurs is needed at the national, regional and international levels. The UNECE was requested to develop new programmes and activities to remedy the situation.

Three groups of proposals for further action were adopted. They aim at: (i) raising the awareness of the potential of women-entrepreneurs and promoting positive role models; (ii) building regional networks of women-entrepreneurs; and (iii) enhancing e-capabilities of women-entrepreneurs and promoting the region-wide electronic commerce among women-entrepreneurs.

### ***Raising the awareness***

- Further extension of the virtual Gallery of Excellent Women Entrepreneurs; and
- Establishing an Award for Excellent Women Entrepreneur in the ECE region in five categories.

### ***Building regional networks***

- Establishing an on-line network of women's business associations on the UNECE website; and
- Holding the annual Forum of Women-Entrepreneurs, as a three-day long event, in October each year.

*Enhancing e-capabilities*

- Creating a regional cyber-market for women-entrepreneurs to exchange information, propose new ideas and projects, receive information on the financing, national and international fairs, study tours, training opportunities;
- Establishing Technology and E-Commerce Learning Centres to provide training in e-business and web technologies; and
- Establishing an Euro-Asian Foundation of Women-Entrepreneurs to mobilize resources needed to finance these activities.

During the Forum two ad hoc Initiative Groups were established. The Initiative Group for the CIS countries and the Initiative Group for the South Caucasus. Statements of these two Groups are embodied in Annex II and Annex III.

---



## ANNEX I

## PROGRAMME

- 08.00 - 09.00      **Registration of participants|**
- 09.00 - 09.45      **Welcome coffee and croissants offered by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women (Switzerland)**
- OPENING SESSION**
- 10.00 – 10.30      **Welcoming address: Women’s entrepreneurship and UNECE**  
*Ms. Danuta Hübner, United Nation Under-Secretary-General, Executive Secretary (UNECE)*
- Chairperson:** *Ms. Larissa Kapitsa, Director, Coordinating Unit for Operational Activities (UNECE)*
- 10.30 - 11.30      **SESSION I: Diversity and similarity of personal experiences: The UNECE Gallery of Excellent Women-Entrepreneurs**
- Chairman:** *Mr. Antal Szabo, Regional Adviser on Entrepreneurship and SMEs (UNECE)*
- Moderator:** *Ms. Cornelia Rotaru, General Director, Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Romania)*
- *Ms. Gisèle Rufer, Founder of “DELANCE”, Winner of the Golden Idea Oscar 2000 from the Swiss Association for Idea and Innovation (Switzerland)*
  - *Ms. Meltem Kurstan, General Manager, “Kurstan Pharmaceuticals” (Turkey)*
  - *Ms. Bozena Batycka, Owner, “Epocca” (Poland)*
  - *Ms. Ratkan Israilova, Founder of the Credit Union “Kairat-Bol” (Kyrgyzstan)*
- 11.30 - 13.00      **SESSION II: Networks of women-entrepreneurs in the ECE region: Partnership, institution building, access to information, and business development services**
- Chairperson:** *Ms. Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, Regional Adviser on Gender and Economy (UNECE)*
- Moderator:** *Ms. Dunja Pastizzi-Ferencic, Senior Adviser, Council for International Economic Relations, Winner of the Global Entrepreneur of the Year 2000 Award (Croatia)*
- *Ms. Cristina Grigorescu, CEO, “Kasta Metal”, and President, Association of Entrepreneurial Women (Romania)*
  - *Ms. Lubica Mandicova, Executive Director, “Prospecta”, Center for Management Development, Founder of CEBWA (Slovakia)*
  - *Ms. Ewa Lisowska, President, International Women’s Forum (Poland)*

- **Ms. Marta Turk**, *President, Association of Slovenian Entrepreneurs, Winner of the European Women of Achievement Award 2001 (Slovenia)*
- **Ms. Nino Elizbarashvili**, *President, Georgian Association of Women in Business (Georgia)*
- **Ms. Conchita Poncini**, *Representative, International Federation of Business and Professional Women and International Federation of University Women (Switzerland)*

13.00 - 15.00

**Lunch Break**

15.00 - 16.30

**SESSION III: Challenges for women-entrepreneurs: Access to technology and foreign markets**

**Chairperson:** *Ms. Larissa Kapitsa, Director, Coordinating Unit for Operational Activities (UNECE)*

**Moderator:** *Mr. Andrew Fiddaman, Associate Director, Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum (United Kingdom)*

- **Ms. Marianne Dott-Kallenius**, *Chamber of Commerce of East Sweden (Sweden)*
- **Ms. Nedyalka-Nelly Popova**, *Owner and General Manager, Apple Center (Bulgaria)*
- **Ms. Saida Iskakova**, *Director, NPO "Microcredit" (Kazakhstan)*
- **Ms. Olga Apatenko**, *Head of the Chief Department, State Committee of Ukraine for Regulatory Policy and Entrepreneurship (Ukraine)*
- **Mr. Gerry Finnegan**, *Senior Specialist, Women's Entrepreneurship Development, International Labour Organization (ILO)*
- **Ms. Hanne T. Laugesen**, *Head, Department of Conferences and Gender Focal Point, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*

17.30 - 18.00

**CONCLUDING SESSION: Next steps to better utilize a regional perspective of UNECE to promote women's entrepreneurship**

**Chairperson:** *Ms. Danuta Hübner, United Nations Under-Secretary-General, Executive Secretary (UNECE)*

18.30

**Reception hosted by the UNECE**

---







