

DEVELOPING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN SOUTH ASIA: ISSUES, INITIATIVES AND EXPERIENCES

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's entrepreneurship has a tremendous potential in empowering women and transforming society. Yet this potential remains largely untapped, with less than 10 per cent of the entrepreneurs in South Asian countries being women.

Studies have shown that a host of barriers prevent women from realizing their full potential as entrepreneurs, where they could make significant contribution to society. Entrepreneurship by definition implies being in control of one's life and activities. It is precisely this independence that many societies have denied women (Vishwanathan, 2001). Women's family obligations often bar them from becoming successful entrepreneurs in both developed and developing nations. As Seymour puts it, "Having primary responsibility for children, home and older dependent family members, few women can devote all their time and energies to their business" (Seymour, 2001). Traditional gender role expectations and patriarchal attitudes in many developing nations make it even more difficult for women to relieve themselves of family responsibilities. The familial and social conditioning in many developing countries inhibits the confidence, independence and mobility of women. This translates into poor access to information, credit, technology, markets, etc., and prevents women from starting a business or women entrepreneurs from growing beyond a particular level. The situation is more critical in many South Asian countries, defined as comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The potential impact of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on women's economic and social development has been studied by academics, development agencies and policymakers over the past decades. With more and more women taking up entrepreneurial activities the world over, identifying the constraints and limitations which prevent women from starting and succeeding in their own businesses is an important aspect of development research.

The overall objective of the paper is to review the issues, initiatives and experiences in developing women entrepreneurs in South Asia. The literature review undertaken for this study suggests that there are three types of issues mostly referred by different authors: (a) general profile of women entrepreneurs and their backgrounds, (b) critical issues pertaining to women's entrepreneurship, and the problems and constraints faced by them, (c) various governmental and non-governmental organizations formed to enable women to access available credit facilities, training and capacity-building, and making provisions for infrastructural capital for various entrepreneurial ventures. In light of this, issues pertaining to women entrepreneurship in general and in SMEs in particular, have been reviewed for the paper.

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Women entrepreneurs, for the purpose of this study, are defined as women running their own SMEs within the formal sector in South Asia. The focus is thus on women entrepreneurs in the formal sector rather than micro-enterprises. However, because of differences in definitions and lack of statistics it has not always been possible to concentrate only on the formal sector. Many a times, the available studies do not distinguish between the formal and the informal sectors, or it is not very clear what size of enterprise they are analysing. In other cases, authors may have clubbed micro, small and medium-sized enterprises together for their analysis.

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section II, entitled “Conceptual framework” deals with issues of definition and statistics on women entrepreneurs in South Asia. Section III profiles women entrepreneurs in the region while Section IV deals with the hurdles and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. Section V documents some international good practice for capacity-building of women entrepreneurs. Section VI moves towards solutions by documenting some case studies of examples of support organizations and networks in the South Asia region. Section VII outlines recommendations for further action.