Call for Research Proposals:
Evidence-based Financial Solutions for Women Entrepreneurs

Deadline to submit proposals: 31 August 2020, 23:59 ICT

1. KEY INFORMATION OVERVIEW

Objective:
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is issuing a Call for Research Proposals to undertake human centered design inspired research. The research should explore the nuanced challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in accessing financing at different stages of their enterprise journey and offer solutions to those challenges. The end objective of this applied research is to identify innovative financial solutions that can be developed or tailored to best address the needs and demands of women entrepreneurs.

The research outcome should address gaps in knowledge and improve the understanding of the business environment and financial constraints facing women entrepreneurs’ access and usage of financial services, in at least one of the following countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and/or Viet Nam.

The research findings will be used to inform the design of private sector solutions that enhance different groups of women entrepreneurs’ access and use of financial services, as well as inspire replication of proposed solutions in the market. Additionally, the research findings will be made publicly available to contribute to the body of literature on barriers women enterprises face in accessing finance.

Research publication:
The research will be published under UN copyright and in line with United Nations publication guidelines.

Who can apply?
Applicants are encouraged to create innovative partnerships or coalitions to undertake the research. For example innovative partnerships could consist of universities or non-profits, partnered with telecommunication service providers, financial service providers or other relevant institutions. The lead applicant, must fall into one of the following categories:

- Not-for-profit organization
- Government entity
- United Nations entity or multi-lateral organization
- Individual researcher (self-employed or affiliated with the one of the above entities)

Private sector institutions are also encouraged to apply, however must partner with one of the 4 categories of eligible “lead partners” listed above.

1 A women entrepreneur is defined as a women or group of women who initiates and operates a business enterprise.
Successful applicants will receive:
- Up to US$ 25,000 in funding to undertake the research;
- Support from ESCAP’s Research Technical Advisory Group, which will provide technical advice in research design and peer reviews of the research outputs;
- Publication of the research, subject to United Nations standards and publication guidelines;
- Opportunities to present research at ESCAP events, workshops and forums;
- Dissemination of the research results via ESCAP communication channels and social media; and
- The chance for the research to inform the design of private sector financial solutions for women entrepreneurs.

Research implementation timeline: 1 October 2020 – 28 February 2021 (5 months)

Proposal submission calendar:
• Posting date of the call for research proposals: 24/7/2020
• Deadline to submit questions: 21/08/2020
• Final deadline for proposals: 31/08/2020 23:59 ICT
• Applicants will be informed on the outcome of their submission by mid-September 2020.

For any questions regarding the proposal/application process, please send inquiries to: escap-cwe@un.org

Proposals should be returned to ESCAP by email to escap-cwe@un.org no later than midnight on 31/08/2020 23:59 ICT. Please ensure your submission file size is no larger than 10 MB. Proposals must follow the submission format as outlined in the Proposal Application Form and Budget Proposal.

2. ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (ESCAP)

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is the regional development arm of the United Nations for the Asia-Pacific region. Made up of 53 Member States and 9 Associate Members, with a geographical region home to around two thirds of the world’s population. Established in 1947 with its headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand, ESCAP works to overcome some of the region’s greatest challenges by providing results oriented projects, technical assistance and capacity building to member States in the following areas: Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development; Trade, Investment and Innovation; Transport; Environment and Development; Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction; Social Development; Statistics; Sub-regional activities for development and Energy.

ESCAP provides a forum for its Member States to promote regional cooperation and collective action in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, assisting countries to achieve shared economic growth and social equity. Our vision is to be the most comprehensive multilateral platform for promoting cooperation among Member States to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific.

For more information on the ESCAP, see www.unescap.org.
3. ABOUT ESCAP’S CATALYSING WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROJECT

Women’s entrepreneurship is increasingly being recognized as a key catalyst for advancing women’s economic empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region. By setting up and managing a business, women can achieve economic independence, overcome poverty through asset building, and improve their well-being as well as that of their families and communities.

ESCAP’s research illustrates that while entrepreneurs in general face considerable barriers, women entrepreneurs face additional disadvantages which hold them back from achieving their full potential. Example of barriers that limit opportunities for women to establish, manage and develop an enterprise, include: a) policies and legislation that are blind to the specific circumstances, needs and interests of women; b) limited access to finance, credit and ICT; c) limited opportunities for capacity development; and d) discriminatory socio-cultural norms. Such barriers jeopardize their capacity to start-up a business and grow their businesses, preventing them from fully participating in the economy. As a result, it undermines the potential for women entrepreneurs to be ‘agents of change’ in their communities and to foster growth, employment and poverty reduction in the Asia-Pacific region.

Out of the estimated 315 million formal MSMEs in developing countries around the world, only 73.5 million or 23% are owned by women. Out of these 73.5 million MSMEs, 39% are partially or fully credit constrained. The finance gap for women-owned MSMEs in developing countries is estimated at $1.5 trillion, or 32% of the total finance gap for MSMEs. For women wanting to start or expand a business, access to finance is key.

ESCAP’s project: Catalyzing Women’s Entrepreneurship: Creating a Gender-Responsive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem, is funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada. The project is a five-year initiative, aimed at addressing three key overarching barriers faced by women entrepreneurs: (1) enabling policy environment and regulatory challenges, (2) access to finance, and (3) use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by women entrepreneurs. Overall, the project aims to crowd-in investment capital, competition and innovation, and increase the range and reach of services supporting women entrepreneurs, directly supporting 20,000 women entrepreneurs by December 2023.

This Call for Research Proposals will support the achievement of this goal, by providing a body of actionable evidence for the public and private sectors to apply in their work/programmes. Furthermore, the research undertaken will inform the design of ESCAP’s 2021 Women Enterprise Finance Innovation Fund. That Fund will provide risk capital to financial service providers, technology and FinTech institutions, and other stakeholders, to design, test and/or scale innovative solutions for women entrepreneurs to access and use innovative financial products and services.

4. REQUIREMENTS & ELIGIBILITY

4.1 Research Focus
Through this Call for Proposals, ESCAP intends to partner with up to six proposals to undertake research to identify bottlenecks which inhibit women entrepreneurs in accessing and using financing to start-up and/or grow their business. Human centered design inspired research is preferred. Human centered

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2 MSME Finance Gap Report, 2017
3 Please note that it is allowed for one organization to submit more than one proposal.
design inspired research means that the research should gather data from women entrepreneurs who are currently using financial services for their business or have a need to access financial services for their business but are under served or unserved entirely.

Women entrepreneurs face interconnected challenges, beyond those that are financial in nature. At the same time, the financial market is dependent on a functioning support ecosystem, which allows for financial services to meet the needs and demands of clients. Barriers faced by women entrepreneurs can include constraints in the policy or regulatory environment, business environment, social cultural norms, technology and service offerings, etc. No one challenge is faced in isolation, as markets are interconnected and complex. This Call for Research Proposals aims to uncover the interconnected barriers which are stumbling blocks for women entrepreneurs in starting-up and expanding their business. Ultimately, the research should explore the enabling environment and identify which financial solutions (including digital financial and innovative financing models) can best address the needs and demands of women entrepreneurs. At the same time, it is encouraged (where relevant) that the research additionally considers structural barriers, such as regulatory barriers and/or gaps in the financial rails⁴, which subsequently need to be addressed in order to ensure a functioning financial and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Existing research and information gaps have been identified in the Background Note. It is highly encouraged that applicants review the Background Note in order to prepare their proposal.

**Potential Research Topics**

When applicants are preparing their proposal, some potential thematic areas for research consideration include the following. Please note that these topics are for inspiration only and alternatives are strongly encouraged:

- Bankability of the micro and small women entrepreneurs in the informal and formal sector whose needs go beyond microfinance
- Financial resilience of women-owned enterprise in the face of business interruption (e.g. due to COVID-19, climate-change induced disasters, etc.)
- Formalization business registration and business development services
- Value chain financing for the retail and wholesale sector
- Digital merchant payments and creation of digital financial records to support access to credit
- Technology enabled alternative forms of credit assessment
- Alternative financing mechanisms
- Digitally delivered business development services

**Example Research Questions (tentative examples):**

- What are the business environment constraints for access to finance for different types of women entrepreneurs? Based on these findings, what are possible recommendations for private sector solutions to address these?
- What is the potential demand and considerations for financial and non-financial resilience building measures e.g. climate and disasters risks finance and insurance to support business

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⁴ Financial rails refers to elements which enable a functioning financial ecosystem, for example this can include agent banking networks, interoperability of payment systems, a functioning credit bureau, etc.
continuity for women entrepreneurs to mitigate the effects of natural disasters? (e.g. in Bangladesh, Nepal, Samoa and Fiji)

- What are the demand-side needs for social commerce and innovative fintech solutions among women micro-entrepreneurs in the retail sector for social commerce and innovative fintech solutions to support their businesses growth, trade promotion and financial inclusion? (e.g. Cambodia, Viet Nam)

4.2 Research Methodology

Applicants are encouraged to use innovative approaches to data gathering. COVID-19 has had significant impacts on how research is able to be undertaken, particularly human centered design inspired research which usually requires in-person contact i.e. focus groups and interviews. ESCAP encourages a human centric approach and welcomes applicants to devise innovative local partnerships, strategies and alternative data collection approaches to gain granular demand-side insights from women entrepreneurs and validate these findings.

It is important for applicants to consider cost effective, timely/quick, yet robust methodologies for data collection. Some such data collection methodologies could include, but are not limited to:

- Big data analysis - for example big data analysis of women entrepreneur’s usage patterns of a financial service or range of financial services;
- Lean data methodologies with enabling technologies such as SME or computer-assisted telephone interviewing that can be designed and deployed in local languages;
- Phone surveys through cooperative/women’s business associations, in which the collector of data would be trained, and would know the respondents and be able to put them at ease in a phone call;
- Customer journey\(^5\) analysis - it is noted that such research can require extensive time to result in robust findings and therefore, in this case it would be acceptable for the proposal to focus on research that is already underway (but not yet completed).

As with all research methods there are limitations and considerations to be made. These limitations and considerations must be articulated in the proposal (refer to Proposal Application Template).

To apply for this Call for Research Proposals, the research proposed must be new research which will be undertaken or research which is currently underway. Past research can be used as desk review materials; however the funding provided by ESCAP must be used for new or ongoing research aligned with the ESCAP’s research focus (articulated in section 4.1). If the proposal is for research currently underway, a justification must be given as to why additional funding is required and a description of the additionality the funding will offer to the research outcome.

4.3 Research Outcomes

The research findings will be used to inform the design of ESCAP’s 2021 Women Enterprise Finance Innovation Challenge. The Innovation Challenge will provide risk capital for finance and technology organizations to design, test and scale solutions which support women entrepreneurs in starting up, sustaining and growing their business. The research undertaken through this Call for Research Proposals will specifically support the identification of particular financial gaps in the market, identification of

\(^5\) In this context, customer journey refers to a sum of experiences that a women entrepreneur faces when using or attempting to access a financial product.
financial (including FinTech and alternative finance) solutions which meet the needs/demands of women entrepreneurs, thematic topics and/or sectors of focus, and regulatory considerations which may be required to test or introduce such solutions in a particular jurisdiction.

The research study produced will be published under UN copyright and in line with United Nations publication guidelines. The data and information of individuals will not be shared publicly and will be anonymized to comply with privacy standards. The research will contribute to the body of literature on barriers women enterprise face in accessing finance.

It is expected that the publishable research document be no longer than a maximum of 40 pages in length. After the research is published, additional related activities such as workshop’s, consultations, webinars, etc. may be organized by ESCAP, in collaboration with the research partner/individual, to further disseminate the research.

4.4 Who can Apply?
Applicants are encouraged to create innovative partnerships or coalitions to undertake the research. For example innovative partnerships could consist of universities or non-profits, partnered with telecommunication service providers, financial service providers or other relevant institutions. The lead applicant, must fall into one of the following categories:
- Not-for-profit organization
- Government entity
- United Nations entity or multi-lateral organization
- Individual researcher (self-employed or affiliated with the one of the above entities)

Private sector institutions are also encouraged to apply, however must partner with one of the 4 categories of eligible “lead partners” listed above. The private sector applicant must therefore be a partner of the lead applicant.

4.5 Geographic Scope of Research
The research must focus on women entrepreneurs in one or several of the following countries, these include: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and/or Viet Nam. No other geographic coverage will be considered for funding.

Within the 6 countries specified, sub-regional analysis can be considered where relevant e.g. in South Asia (Nepal and Bangladesh); South East Asia (Cambodia and Viet Nam); and the Pacific (Fiji and Samoa). Alternatively, within the scope of the 6 focus countries, research can be conducted across multiple countries based on common themes (e.g. bankability, business registration, e-commerce, distinct financial needs across sectors, innovative financing for business continuity, etc.)

Case studies involving best practices and lessons from other countries can also be drawn on as desk research, however the research and data collection must be undertaken in one or several of the 6 countries mentioned.

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6 This will be taken forward and funded separately from the research funding provided.
7 A women entrepreneur is defined as a women or group of women who initiates and operates a business enterprise.
4.6 Research Ethics
Ethical research procedures are critical to ensuring the rights, dignity and anonymity of those who are participating in the research. Furthermore, special precautions and considerations need to be given to vulnerable populations. Research processes should uphold the values of the United Nations and ensure the protection and dignity of all those who are engaged in the research process. It is also critical that research subjects are informed of their rights, how the data and any photographs will be used, potential risks, limits of confidentiality, participants right to decline participation and contact persons for questions. The information must be explained in the research subject’s language both in writing and if engaging directly, verbally as well.

4.7 Funding and Support
ESCAP’s will provide up to US$ 25,000 in grant funding to a maximum of 6 proposals. Grant funds must be used to undertake the research proposed by the institution and/or individual as articulated in their proposal. Financial proposals can include costs such as operational/staff costs, travel, sub grants to partner institutions who are supporting the research process, capacity building/training of researchers, etc. The funds cannot be used to buy infrastructure (such as vehicles)8 or for lending or investment purposes.

Please note that US$ 25,000 is the maximum threshold of funding. Proposals will be scored based on value for money and appropriate budgeting standards based on the research objectives. Overbudgeting or inflating costs could result in a reduced evaluation score.

Applicants are also encouraged to demonstrate in the budget proposal their contribution to cost sharing and/or in-kind contributions.

In addition to funding support, ESCAP is establishing a Research Technical Advisory Group, which will provide technical advice in research design and peer reviews of the research outputs to further validate and quality assure the final research product.

4.8 Research Timeline
It is expected that the research commence on 1 October 2020, with the finalized and approved document submitted to ESCAP by 28 February 2021 (5 months). This timeline is set in order to allow for the research to be disseminated and appropriately incorporated into the design of ESCAP’s 2021 Women Enterprise Finance Innovation Challenge, which is set to launch in March 2021.

4.9 Monitoring of Results
ESCAP expects to be engaged throughout the research process with mutually agreed dates to check-in, discuss progress and provide support as may be required. Given the short time to complete the research, ESCAP and its delegated representatives (as appropriate) will monitor progress and request information/updates periodically.

The grantee is required to undertake ethical research practices. The grantee will be required to share data collected through the initiative, within the scope of privacy requirements (anonymization of data if required) and ethical standards.

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8 Infrastructure such as laptops, software and/or survey devices can be considered, however must be clearly stated as part of the budget proposal.
5. PARAMETERS OF THE AGREEMENT

5.1 Agreement and Duration
The winning applicant is expected to sign a Letter of Agreement (Grant Agreement) with ESCAP or in the case of individual applicants, the individual will enter into a consulting agreement. A sample of the ESCAP Agreement Terms and Conditions for Letters of Agreement has been made available and a sample of the General Conditions of Contracts for the Services of Consultants or Individual Contractors has also been made available.

The payment schedule will be mutually discussed and agreed upon between the winning applicant and ESCAP. Clear milestones will be established through the agreement to ensure that the funds are being utilized in line with the objectives of the research proposal. Disbursement of project funds will be aligned to the achievement of the agreed milestones and objectives.

If you have any questions regarding the Letter of Agreement, please email escap-cwe@un.org with your inquiry.

5.2 Language
The deliverables, as well as all related correspondence exchanged by the organization and ESCAP, shall be written in English.

6. ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

Minimum qualification criteria:

- The lead applicant must fall into one of 4 categories: not-for-profit organization, government entity, United Nations or multi-lateral organization, or individual researcher. For not-for-profit organizations, proof of the organization’s not-for-profit status will be required as part of the application process.
- The entity or individual researcher must have proven experience in the country in which the research is being undertaken. If the entity/researcher does not have this experience, a partnership with an organization which does is required.
- Partners institutions included in the proposal must submit an intent letter, stating the intent to partner with the lead applicant of this initiative.
- The research must be undertaken in one or several of the following countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and/or Viet Nam.
- The research proposal topic must relate to challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in accessing financing in their enterprise journey.
- The entity or individual researcher must have proven research experience, this can include big data, focus group, survey, key informant interviews, etc. Desk research, in which no further data gathering was undertaken, will not be considered as adequate expertise.
- Written confirmation (Annex 1) that the organization has reviewed the ESCAP Agreement Terms and Conditions or the individual has reviewed the General Conditions of Contracts for the Services of Consultants or Individual Contractors and is prepared to sign it without revision to ESCAP’s standard legal text.
- The proposal submission must be complete and received on time. Please refer to the submission checklist on page 1 of the Proposal Application Form to ensure all materials are included in your proposal.
Other requirements and qualifications:
- The research proposal must be clearly presented and with sound research methodology, including limitations of the research.
- Samples of previous research undertaken by yourself or your organization, on similar topics or using similar research methodologies.
- A clear research plan/timeline which meets the timeline requirements set out in Section 4. This includes confirmed human resources to cover all planned/required activities.
- Expertise or experience working with financial institutions, FinTech companies, technology companies, women entrepreneurs and/or women focused institutions is preferred.
- Experience working with international organisations (preferred).

Structure of the proposal:
- Please refer to the ESCAP website for all of the proposal materials. We ask that you download the Proposal Application Form, Budget Proposal and Annex 1 – Submission Confirmation and ensure that the proposal is filled out using the templates provided. The proposal should be returned by email to: escap-cwe@un.org. Any proposal received NOT following the proposal template or any alterations to the template will be automatically disqualified.
- Additional documents or links to documents may be included at the applicant’s discretion.

Submission of the proposal:
- Applicants who have any questions regarding the Call for Research Proposals should submit their questions by email to: escap-cwe@un.org
- To submit the final proposal, please send it by email to escap-cwe@un.org with the subject line: ESCAP-RESEARCH CHALLENGE
- The deadline to submit the proposal is 31 August 2020, 23:59 ICT. Proposals received after this date will be automatically eliminated. Please ensure your submission is no larger than 10 MB.

Evaluation process:
The decision will follow the following timeline and process:

- Proposals received by 31 August 2020, 23:59 ICT.
- Proposals reviewed and shortlisted by the ESCAP Innovative Financing Team.
- Shortlisted proposals will be reviewed through an independent Review Committee. All committee members will be required to sign a non-disclosure and all proposal information will be strictly confidential.
- Selected proposals will be informed, and administrative partnership/contracting measures will be undertaken by ESCAP.
- The target date for the conclusion of the grant agreement or individual contracting is 30 September 2020.
Evaluation Scoring and Criteria

Proposal Application (including CVs of team): 700 Points

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<th>Organization and Partner Information</th>
<th>Points Obtainable</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Expertise of Organization / Individual</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Research Proposal</td>
<td>425</td>
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<td>3. Research Ethics and Risk Analysis</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>700</strong></td>
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**Expertise of Organization / Individual**

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<tr>
<td>1.1 Reputation of Organization/Individual and Partners - Credibility / Reliability / Industry Standing</td>
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| 1.2 General Organizational Capability which is likely to affect implementation
  - Subject matter expertise
  - Expertise and strength of the partners
  - Experience working in the proposed research country/ies
  - Past experience with similar research methodologies | 100              |
| 1.3 Relevant expertise of the key team members                          | 50                |
| **Total Part 1**                                                       | **200**           |

**Research Proposal**

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| 2.1 Research Scope
  - Proposed location/country and research target group
  - Research question that the researcher aims to answer
  - Proposed implementation timeline aligned with ESCAP objectives | 100              |
| 2.2 Background and rational for undertaking the research               | 50                |
| 2.3 Research methodology and limitations, human centred design inspired elements of the research, and innovation in data collection methodologies | 275              |
| **Total Part 2**                                                       | **425**           |

**Research Ethics and Risk Analysis**

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<td>3.1 Description of the measures to ensure ethical research practices are upheld</td>
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<td>3.2 Risk Analysis</td>
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<td><strong>Total Part 3</strong></td>
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Financial Proposal (300 points)

1. To be computed as a ratio of the Proposal’s offer to the lowest price among the proposals received by ESCAP. **(225 points maximum)**
2. Has the proposer suggested any innovation or provided a compelling argument in delivering the services that are able to deliver value for money to ESCAP? **(75 points maximum)**

**Total 1,000 points.**
This initiative is supported by:

**ARTNET on STI**

This research call is part of the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on STI Policy ([ARTNET on STI Policy](#)). ARTNET on STI Policy is the knowledge platform on science, technology and innovation policies for sustainable development. By means of research, information dissemination and capacity building, our aim is to provide guidance on STI policies to researchers and policymakers in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Catalyzing Women’s Entrepreneurship**

The [Catalyzing Women’s Entrepreneurship project](#) is a five-year initiative, aimed at addressing three key overarching barriers faced by women entrepreneurs: (1) enabling policy environment and regulatory challenges, (2) [access to finance](#), and (3) use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by women entrepreneurs. Overall, the project aims to crowd-in investment capital, competition and innovation, and increase the range and reach of services supporting women entrepreneurs.

The project is funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.