



## Message from the Chairperson



As Chairperson of CACCI Women Entrepreneurs Council (CWEC), I am pleased to present the 22<sup>nd</sup> issue of the Newsletter of CWEC to all our colleagues and friends.

This issue highlights the trends, the latest news and interesting reports on women entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific region. I hope that you will find the articles included in this Newsletter of great value, and look forward to your contribution to the Newsletter in the future.

As many of you may know, this Council has been a valuable platform for information exchange and networking for all representatives from the region. Therefore, all CACCI members are encouraged to take advantage of the Council and the Newsletter as channels to voice their opinions and viewpoints.

With warm regards,

**Mukta Nandini Jain**  
Chairperson, CWEC  
Past President, FICCI Ladies Organization (2006-07)



# How this Vietnamese entrepreneur won Google's backing for her A.I. app

By Karen Gilchrist



*Vu Van, co-founder and CEO of AI-powered English language app ELSA.*

*Photo credit: ELSA*

**T**he coronavirus has sparked a revolution in education, pushing schools and institutions online and driving new demand for e-learning apps.

One among them is ELSA, an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered language platform designed to help non-native English learners improve their speech and pronunciation via short, app-based lessons.

Under the pandemic, the Google-backed company — which uses machine learning to train spoken English specifically — has hit around 11 million users and tapped new markets as international lockdowns have prompted a new need for tech-based learning solutions. But when Vietnamese entrepreneur Vu Van founded the company in 2015, it was out of a whole different necessity.

## **A billion-person problem**

Van still remembers struggling to find her voice.

Having relocated to the U.S. from her native Vietnam some years before, first for study then for work, she frequently found herself lacking the confidence to speak out, despite being fluent in English.

It was a problem shared by her non-native peers. Concerns over mispronunciation held them back in her Stanford MBA class and, later, management consulting work, often leading them to be overlooked or, worse still, said Van, mistrusted.

And if it was an issue for them, it was an issue for many others, too. Of the approximately 1.5 billion English speakers globally, the World Economic Forum estimates over 1 billion are non-native or learning English as a second language.

So Van decided to do something about it, dreaming up a tech-enabled tool that could accurately detect users' broken English and provide easy-to-follow solutions at a fraction of the cost of a tutor.

"To get a perfect American accent or British accent, that's very hard. But to speak confidently and fluently so that other people can understand you, that can be fixed. And if there's a lot of benefit in doing so, then why not?" she told CNBC Make It.

## **Finding a co-founder**

Still, with no AI or machine learning experience of her own, Van knew she had her work cut out making her vision a reality.

Having quit her consulting job, she spent the next six months searching for a technical co-founder, speaking to "basically every AI voice recognition expert in the Bay area" to gauge their interest and gain their insights.

"My approach was very simple: Every day I just need to talk to five people. I don't care who they are as long as I can get connections and then those five people will introduce me to another five people," she said.

Van's search eventually led her to Germany, then-host to the world's largest voice recognition technology conference, after a technical professor advised her "if you don't find anybody there, then you might as well shut the company down."

## **A meeting of minds**

There, among a gathering of 3,000 experts, Van met Xavier Anguera, a top scientist who, as she put it, "had been in research for way too long and was itching for that impact."

Within weeks, he'd agreed to join her, temporarily leaving his family in Portugal and relocating to Van's "tiny" San Francisco apartment to stress test the partnership and build out their idea.

It was a process that would require total honesty, with “all the toughest conversations being had early on,” such as agreeing on salaries and equity splits, acknowledged Van, who had collated a checklist of questions to ask with the help of her fellow founder friends.

“We said if we don’t kill each other by the end of the three months then I think we might be okay,” she recalled.



*Vu Van, co-founder and CEO of AI-powered English language speaking app ELSA. Photo credit: ELSA*

### Going viral

But the high stakes approach paid off. With Anguera in place as co-founder and chief technology officer, the pair immediately set to work building a prototype; inputting data from non-native English speakers and benchmarking it against standard American English.

For Van, that meant hitting the ground in her native Vietnam to help train the AI against a broad set of non-native English speakers, from bus drivers to boardroom executives.

However, the true turning point came a few months later, when ELSA won South by Southwest’s 2016 start-up competition, causing the app to go viral, amassing 30,000 users within 24 hours, and granting the team access to user data from across the world.

“The goal at the beginning was collecting data, so the faster we can get there the faster we can train our AI,” said Van.

### Winning Google’s backing

With an international dataset in place to educate the technology on a range of non-native English accents, from India to Spain, the wheels were set in motion.

Shortly afterward, having relied on their own savings for around six months, Van and Anguera secured an initial seed investment to grow the business. By early 2018, with a growing team and several million users across 100 countries, ELSA secured \$3.2 million in funding, including from Southeast Asia-focused venture capital fund Monk’s Hill Ventures.

“ELSA was one of our first investments in Vietnam where we were very inspired by Vu and Xavier’s conviction in solving a real problem for over

1.5 billion English learners,” Monk’s Hill Ventures’ co-founder and managing partner Peng T. Ong told CNBC Make It via email.

That vote of confidence was bolstered in 2019, when backing from Google’s AI-focused Gradient Ventures took total funding raised to more than \$12 million and granted ELSA access to Google’s team of technical staff to help build out its backend infrastructure.

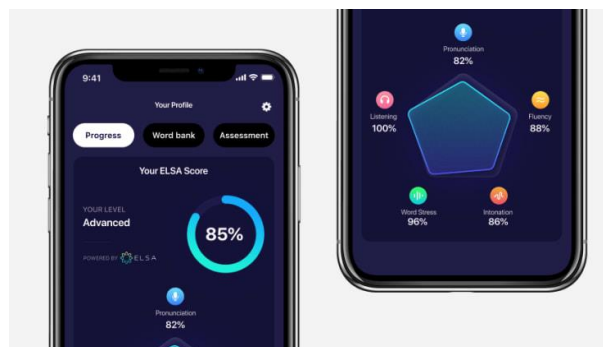
### Surging under the pandemic

The boost came just months before the coronavirus pandemic overturned education and supercharged the growth of online tools.

ELSA — which operates a freemium model that gives users full access to over 1,000 courses for around \$3-\$6 per month, depending on their package — has since seen user numbers surge “three-to-four times” on a monthly basis, according to Van.

That growth is not only from ELSA’s typical users, but also from schools and businesses adapting to new ways of teaching. The company has now partnered with dozens of schools and enterprises across Vietnam and India, as well as Brazil and Ukraine, as it expands into the business-to-business market (B2B).

“Covid really opened up a segment that is new for us,” said Van. “There’s a paradigm shift among parents that there’s a different way of learning. Instead of always having to send their kids to a language learning center or a school, they can rely on technology. We ride on the benefit of that.”



*English language app ELSA provides users with feedback on they perfect their speaking and pronunciation. Photo credit: ELSA*

### Building for the future

As the pandemic rolls on, that demand is likely to continue. “In today’s world, fluent English is considered an asset for greater economic opportunity and we expect to see the continuing growth of edutech — partly accelerated by the pandemic — in Southeast Asia with more entrepreneurs bringing education innovation through technology,” said Ong.

Van said that means further fundraising will be “on the horizon” soon, as the company looks to bolster its existing teams in San Francisco, Vietnam, India and

Japan, while setting its sights on new markets like Brazil and South Korea.

The new mother also said ELSA is exploring more product innovations, such as continuous monitoring, that would allow the app to give feedback reports based on conversations had throughout the day. Such additions, she noted, will need to closely adhere to data privacy

rules.

“2020 has been a crazy year, but I think we have done well and we’re excited for what’s in store for 2021,” she said.

CNBC

## Five ways to make skills training work for women

By Kathleen Beegle and Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich



*One way to close the gender gap is through skills training such as technical training as well as entrepreneurial or business training programs.*

**A**cross the globe, women are less likely to work for pay, and, when they do, they make less. This gender “jobs gap” is driven by many factors, both on the demand and supply side. One way to close the gap is through skills training such as technical training as well as entrepreneurial or business training programs.

However, obstacles related to social norms, childcare, and mobility keep women from accessing and successfully completing such programs. Training programs should not be blind to these constraints in their design. Our Jobs Policy note *Adapting Skills Training to Address Constraints to Women’s Participation* outlines specific suggestions, based on emerging evidence, on how to re-think training programs to maximize their role in closing the jobs gap.

Here are five ways to help skills training programs boost women’s participation in the workforce.

### **Accompany training with access to finance**

Women typically face more financial constraints than men. This affects their ability to pay for training or related costs, such as transportation. Women also have

less access to finance to support expanding their businesses after receiving training. This inhibits participation in skills training itself as well as putting that training to good use.

Offering cash grants conditional on attendance and financial capital to use upon completion of training can help overcome these barriers. And specific features, like secure savings, as well as coupling with mentors, can maximize impacts.

### **Prevent and address sexual harassment**

Skills training programs need mechanisms to prevent, respond to, and report cases of sexual harassment and abuse. Sexual harassment is a leading cause of high job turnover and school and work absenteeism. Addressing it is not only moral but also smart in terms of program success. Among other features, skills training programs should have an anti-sexual harassment policy and code of conduct, a complaints mechanism, training, and awareness-raising for students, instructors, and other program staff.



### Support childcare

Childcare is a leading barrier preventing women from participating in skills training. In most (if not all) countries, women bear an unequal responsibility for childcare and household chores. When the youth training program *Jovenes en Acción* in Colombia offered childcare subsidies and day care at schools, it saw increased participation of women with children under seven. In addition, employment rates and income for women participants improved more than for men in response to childcare provision.

### Support safe transportation

Transportation can be a constraint to women's participation. Not only do women have less income to spend on transportation, but they are more likely to report safety concerns with transportation options than their male peers. Mobility limitations decrease women's ability to participate in training and income-generating opportunities. In Peru, the youth labor training program *ProJoven* program doubled the stipend to female trainees with children under the age of five for transportation, meals, and medical insurance, resulting in long-term positive benefits in formal employment for women.

### Encourage women to enter traditionally male occupations

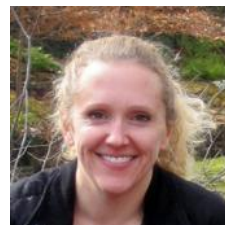
Growing evidence shows that women benefit from crossing into traditional male occupations, which pay better. In Uganda, women who moved into male-dominated sectors such as carpentry, electricals, and metal fabrication, made as much as men, and three times more than women who remained in female-dominated sectors.

One way to facilitate this shift is to provide women with information about male-dominated industries (what they pay, availability of relevant training programs). It's also important to complement skills training with peer groups, networks, and mentorship opportunities. Professional networks are less available for women.

When offered as part of business training, peers and mentors can be valuable as business partners or for support or career counseling. This will help increase the likelihood that women find employment in sectors with higher returns.

*This blog is based on the Adapting Skills Training to Address Constraints to Women's Participation Solutions Note, published in May 2020.*

#### About the Authors:



*Kathleen Beegle*  
Lead Economist with the World Bank Gender Group

*Kathleen Beegle is a Lead Economist with the World Bank Gender Group, joining in 2018. She was previously a Human Development Program Leader for Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, based in Accra, Ghana.*

*Her research experience includes the study of poverty, labor, economic shocks, and methodological studies on household survey data collection in developing countries. She has expertise in the design and implementation of household surveys and their use for poverty and policy analysis. She recently co-lead the World Bank reports *Realizing the Full Potential of Safety Nets in Africa* and *Poverty in A Rising Africa*.*

*Beegle was Deputy Director of the World Bank's World Development Report 2013 on Jobs. She joined the Development Research Group of the World Bank in 2001, where she was a member of the Living Standards Measurement Study team. She received her Ph.D. in Economics from Michigan State University and competed a post-doctoral fellowship at RAND.*



*Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich*  
Economist with the Gender Group, World Bank

*Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich is an Economist with the Gender Group, where she supports efforts to improve the availability of sex-disaggregated data and gender*

statistics at the country level.

More recently, she has been working on a study that aims to provide World Bank TTLs with the guidance to design and implement operations for forcibly displaced people that respond to gender specific vulnerabilities. Eliana

holds a Master's in Public Administration from the Columbia University in the City of New York, and M.Sc. in Economics from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia).

World Bank Blogs

## WePOWER helps Bangladesh's largest power distribution company boost its female workforce

By Tanuja Bhattacharjee and Tehreem Saifey



Female staff attending the Women's Day event in Dhaka, March 2020. Photo: BREB

“WePOWER inspires my work every day,” says Ivy Nahar Tisha, an assistant engineer at the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB), a government-owned power distribution utility. “After joining it, I started encouraging my female colleagues to expand their horizons and explore opportunities to learn, grow, and deliver results.”

A network for women working in South Asia's power and energy sector, WePOWER aims to increase opportunities for women and encourage girls to enroll in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education.

In 2019, Tisha was chosen to represent BREB at WePOWER's conference in Nepal and its Second Partnership Forum in Manila. Since then, in partnership with WePOWER, she has worked to identify opportunities to develop and retain BREB's female workforce. This included hosting workshops on WePOWER and on initiatives at BREB to increase women's participation in management and leadership roles.

Tisha also helped establish a daycare center at BREB's headquarters- which several of its subsidiary rural electricity cooperatives are adopting too- and participated in seminars organized by Bangladesh's Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

BREB has expanded multifold recently to realize the government's vision of providing electricity to 100 percent of Bangladesh's rural population by 2021. To meet the ever-increasing demands of network expansion, upgrade, maintenance, and modernization, along with male engineers, BREB needs to utilize its female workforce better.

Bangladesh has made impressive progress in female labor force participation. Though it outperforms other South Asian countries, its national rate of 36 percent is still considered too low, and female labor force participation has fallen recently. The World Bank continues to work toward the economic empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

BREB, which serves 28 million consumers and benefits almost all of rural Bangladesh, employs some 30,000 people. Around 5,000 female staff work at its subsidiaries- nine of them have female deputy general managers. Additionally, BREB has reserved the post of billing assistants for women.

Enhancing job opportunities for female engineers is a priority for BREB's leadership. But unfortunately, like most utility companies in South Asia, the ratio of female staff at BREB's headquarters is less than 10 percent, and participation in engineering positions is even lower.



*Female staff sharing feedback at the Women's Day event in Dhaka, March 2020. Photo: BREB*

On Women's Day in March, BREB's chairman, Major General Moin Uddin (Rtd.), shared that in partnership with WePOWER, BREB will work to achieve three goals:

- Empower women in the workforce by adopting good practices and policies from leading utilities in South Asia.
- Provide training and learning opportunities for female staff to enhance their technical and managerial skills.
- Create a favorable environment and introduce new initiatives for BREB's women workforce.

To this end, BREB plans to collaborate with WePOWER's partners in Bangladesh. It will arrange awareness seminars and site visits about its operations, planning and design for female engineering students. Recently, BREB established an internship program focused on specific components of the electricity distribution system for seven female electrical engineering graduates.

At the institutional and policy level, BREB supports the participation of women employees in all technical assignments and capacity building opportunities. Female employees are encouraged to express their needs and suggestions in quarterly staff meetings.

Since BREB joined the WePOWER platform, the participation of female employees has increased by 10 percent in committees such as recruitment, pension and benefits, among others. As BREB expects to hire more qualified female professionals and is committed to investing in its female employees, participation should grow.

Tisha is delighted to see these positive developments and her colleagues feel encouraged and empowered. "I am so proud of the incredible support that my institution is providing to advance the professional development and careers of its female employees," she says. "My colleagues and I feel encouraged and empowered by the opportunity to serve our country – a bright and shining Bangladesh."

#### *About the Authors:*



*Tanuja Bhattacharjee  
Energy Specialist, World Bank*

*Tanuja Bhattacharjee joined the Bank's EEX unit in SAR in July 2017 as an Energy Specialist. Since then, she has been primarily engaged in projects as well as analytical and advisory works on Renewable Energy, Energy Efficiency, Rural Electrification and Energy Service for Refugee communities. In her previous appointments, she was extensively engaged in capacity building initiatives for different stakeholders on eco industrial development and GHG mitigation strategies. She worked in couple of organizations including GIZ (German Development Corporation), leading renewable energy company in Bangladesh and Faculty position in Universities. She also worked in biomass combustion and energy conversion research at Dalhousie University in Canada.*

*Tanuja completed her M. Engineering in Energy from the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Thailand; and B.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering from the Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology (BUET). She also holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Disaster Management from Dhaka University.*



*Tehreem Saifey  
Social Development Specialist (Consultant), World Bank*

*Tehreem is the World Bank Social Development Specialist in Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience and Energy Global Practice in World Bank's South Asia Region, based in Washington DC. She works on gender, citizen engagement, and community-driven development projects. Major strengths include strategic and operational communications, program design, multi stakeholder engagement and partnerships, and social risk analyses.*

*She has conducted policy research and delivered workshops for critical infrastructure security and resilience programs in energy and water sectors at*

NATO headquarters in Ankara, Turkey. At George Mason University, she was the editor and publisher of the monthly CIP (Center for Infrastructure and Homeland Security) Report.

in Master's in Political Management from George Washington University and Master's in Public Policy from George Mason University, USA.

World Bank Blogs

A professional software engineer, Tehreem holds a degree

## Building back better means designing cash transfers for women's empowerment

By Greta L. Bull, Caren Grown, Boutheina Guerhazi, Michal Rutkowski and Mahesh Uttamchandani



In Indonesia, people practice social distancing as they receive social assistance. Photo: © Achmad/World Bank

**S**ri sells food in a public square of her hometown in Java. Her business was doing well, and she thought that soon she and her three children would no longer need support from Indonesia's Family Health Program (PKH), a conditional cash transfer program targeting poor households with children and expectant mothers. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Now Sri's PKH benefit is the mainstay of support for her family.

### G2P programs must tackle inequalities women face

Millions of women like Sri have seen their livelihoods, safety, and agency threatened by COVID-19, as they face fewer employment prospects, increased care responsibilities, and higher risk of domestic violence. With many women working in the informal sector, these factors are exacerbated. Ninety-five percent of women in Asia and 89 percent of women in Sub-Saharan Africa earn income through informal labor, which is characterized by insecurity and insufficient social protection. It is often not counted by governments and aid agencies. For G2P payments to truly benefit the most vulnerable, they must tackle these inequalities in benefits that women are facing due to COVID-19.

At least 200 countries and territories have expanded or introduced social protection measures in response to COVID-19, reaching almost 1 billion new beneficiaries since March. Many are leveraging mobile money platforms to distribute emergency cash assistance to poor households safely and rapidly. Yet, low-income women who live in remote areas with limited connectivity, or who have low digital literacy, are less likely to access these benefits.

Putting women at the center of digital G2P payment programs can help countries to mitigate exclusion risks and maximize the impact on women and girls. The World Bank recently partnered with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Women's World Banking, CGAP, and Stanford University to publish a brief explaining why women are at a heightened risk of exclusion during the rapid scaling and digitization of cash transfers and proposing policy options to maximize women's inclusion.

### Identifying and addressing barriers

The brief highlights five barriers to address: gender gaps in financial access, ID ownership, mobile phone



ownership, inadequate recognition of gender gaps, and insufficient gender data and analysis.

The persistent gap in women's financial access is exacerbated by discriminatory practices, lack of trust in banking institutions, and high costs. While the number of people excluded from the formal financial sector fell from 2.5 billion worldwide in 2011 to 1.7 billion in 2017, 56 percent of those still excluded are women.

Moreover, women face a combination of legal, economic, and social restrictions that contribute to a gender gap in ID coverage. This has led to a gender gap in mobile phone ownership, as over 150 countries require government-issued IDs for SIM registration. Mobile phones are the most widely used channel for digital cash transfers. Yet, in developing countries, 165 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone.

Cash transfer programs that fail to identify gender gaps will exclude women in need. Insufficient sex-disaggregated data, including in information systems, create a partial understanding of gender disparities. Digital G2P programs should be informed by gender analysis that gives a comprehensive view of women's roles, responsibilities, and needs, and how these have been impacted by COVID-19.

### **Digitize, direct, and design**

Theresa is a mother of five living in Mungwi District, Zambia, where she grows vegetables to sell in her community. In 2018, Theresa received a Girls Education and Women's Empowerment and Livelihood (GEWEL) grant digitally into an account she opened at a payment provider of her choice. Along with training, this enabled Theresa to expand her vegetable garden. Today, her business is so lucrative that she has started building a house and a grocery store.

Similarly in Nigeria, the Household Uplifting Programme has provided cash transfers directly to poor female caregivers since 2016. Olukemi is one of them. With the cash transfers, she has grown her locust bean business for export such that she can now feed her kids "until they are satisfied." "From the moment she started receiving the cash transfer, she has been able to stand on her own," said her husband.

The brief offers a framework for designing inclusive and impactful G2P programs that empower more women like Teresa and Olukemi. It makes three recommendations:

1. **Digitizing G2P payments can scale social protection programs** at low cost and provide remote communities with easier access to funds. Digitization can help women to access money closer to where they live and work. Countries with advanced digital G2P payment systems can leverage retail agent networks to expand coverage.
2. **Depositing payments directly into women's accounts is key.** Direct cash transfers with women as the default recipient, such as those in Indonesia, Nigeria and Zambia, offer women

safer access and increased control over funds. Direct payments create a gateway to savings, credit, and other financial services. Furthermore, when women are given the choice of provider, they are more likely to use their accounts actively and access other services.

3. **G2P programs can be smartly and efficiently designed to expand women's opportunities.** Simplifying the application and onboarding processes, and including grievance redressal systems, can improve women's access to program benefits. Critically, programs should elevate women's voices and ensure women play a leading role in decision-making.

The experiences of Indonesia, Nigeria and Zambia illustrate how countries can provide critical assistance to women like Sri, Theresa and Olukemi. Policymakers around the world are committed to building back better, and that starts by empowering women.

*About the Authors:*



*Greta L. Bull  
Chief Executive Officer of Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP)  
Director, World Bank*

*Greta Bull is the CEO of CGAP and a Director at the World Bank Group. Ms. Bull has more than 15 years' experience in development finance. In her most recent role as a Manager in IFC's Financial Institutions Group (FIG), she oversaw a large digital financial services advisory program in sub-Saharan Africa. The program is aimed at expanding the reach of traditional and non-traditional financial service providers, and also involves a significant research and knowledge sharing element. She has extensive experience working in emerging financial markets in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Other career highlights include senior positions with the Eurasia Foundation, in addition to being Director of the Finance, Banking and Enterprise Division at Bannock Consulting/DAI Europe. Her association with the World Bank began in 1992 when she was a Robert S. McNamara fellow based in Kiev, Ukraine.*

*Ms. Bull holds a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and an undergraduate degree in international Studies from the University of Washington. She is a dual U.S./British national.*



*Caren Grown*  
*World Bank Group Global Director, Gender*

*Caren Grown is an internationally recognized expert on gender issues in development. Prior to joining the Bank, she was Economist-In-Residence and co-director of the Program on Gender Analysis in Economics at American University (AU) in Washington, DC. In 2013-2014, she led the UNU-WIDER program on aid effectiveness and gender equality, an international effort which resulted in 22 commissioned papers and a global synthesis. During 2011-2013 she took leave from AU to serve as Senior Gender Advisor and Acting Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at the US Agency for International Development (USAID), where she crafted the Agency's Gender Equality and Female Empowerment policy and led efforts to implement it in systems and programs.*

*Formerly, she was Senior Scholar and Co-Director of the Gender Equality and Economy Program at The Levy Economics Institute at Bard College, Director of the Poverty Reduction and Economic Governance team at the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), and Senior Program Officer at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. She contributed to placing gender equality and female empowerment at the core of the MDGs as Senior Associate of Task Force 3 of the UN Millennium Project. As the longest-serving member of the External Gender Forum of the Asian Development Bank, she advised on many aspects of mainstreaming, research, and results measurement.*

*Dr. Grown's recent books include Taxation and Gender Equity, co-edited with Imraan Valodia (Routledge 2010), The Feminist Economics of Trade, co-edited with Irene Van Staveren, Diane Elson, and Nilufer Cagatay (Routledge 2007), and Trading Women's Health and Rights: the Role of Trade Liberalization and Development, co-edited with Elissa Braunstein and Anju Malhotra (Zed Books 2006). She is the author (with Geeta Rao Gupta) of Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women (Earthscan Press 2005) and co-author with Gita Sen of Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives (Monthly Review Press 1987). Her articles have appeared in World Development, Journal of International Development, Feminist Economics, Health Policy and Planning, and The Lancet.*

*Dr. Grown was an Associate Editor of Feminist Economics (2007-2014), a founding member of the*

*International Working Group on Gender and Macroeconomics (GEM-IWG) (1993-2007), and a member of the Women and Gender Equity Knowledge Hub, Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2006-2007). She holds a PhD and MA in Economics from the New School for Social Research and Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles.*



*Boutheina Guermazi*  
*Director of Digital Development, World Bank*

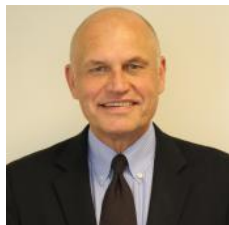
*Dr. Boutheina Guermazi is the Director of Digital Development Department of the Infrastructure Practice Group of the World Bank. She heads a global team working on building digital economies in developing countries, to drive shared prosperity and reduced poverty. The team advises policymakers and regulators, works in collaboration with leading firms and partners, and designs investment and technical assistance programs to improve broadband connectivity and use of digital technology to address development challenges of client countries. The work covers a wide area of focus including broadband networks, mobile networks, cloud infrastructure, internet of things, and big data analytics. The team works collaboratively across sectors to ensure the availability and use of digital government platforms, identification for development and other key foundations to harness digital development, while strengthening cybersecurity, privacy, and data protection. Dr. Guermazi also leads the Digital Development Partnership (DDP), a Multi-Donor Trust Fund focusing on digital development globally.*

*Prior to her role as Director, Dr. Guermazi was Practice Manager of Digital Development covering Africa and the Middle East regions of the World Bank. She also served as Lead Operations Officer in the Regional Integration Unit of the Africa region of the World Bank. During her tenure, she has written and published articles and book chapters on trade law, telecommunications policy, and regulatory reform.*

*Before joining the World Bank, Dr. Guermazi was Assistant Professor at the University of Law and Political and Social Sciences of Tunis, and a Telecommunications consultant to the Sector Reform Unit at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).*

*Dr. Guermazi holds a Ph.D. in Telecommunications Law*

and Policy from the Faculty of Law at McGill University, Canada; an L.L.M. in International Law from Indiana University, USA; and a Bachelor's Degree in Public Law from the University of Tunis, Tunisia. She held a Fulbright Scholarship and was a research scholar at the University of Michigan (USA), the Social Science Research Council (USA), and the Center of Studies for Regulated Industries (Canada).



*Michal Rutkowski  
Global Director for Social Protection and Jobs,  
World Bank*

*Mr. Michal Rutkowski is the Global Director for Social Protection and Jobs – overseeing the World Bank Global Practice responsible for protecting poor and vulnerable from shocks through improving their job opportunities, earning capacity, and social insurance and social assistance (safety net) coverage. Until July 2016, he was the Director for Multilateral Organizations, and prior to that the Country Director for the Russian Federation and the Resident Representative in Moscow for three years. In the period 2004-12, he was Sector Director for Human Development in the Middle East and North Africa and then South Asia regions of the World Bank.*

*Before 1996, after a brief period of work on Africa and China, Mr. Rutkowski worked extensively on social insurance and labor market issues in transition economies and as a country economist for Russia and after taking a leave from the Bank, returned as Sector Manager for social protection between 1998-2004, where he led a team of professionals working on pensions, labor market and social assistance reforms in 28 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union, as well as in Turkey.*

*During his leave from the World Bank in the period 1996-98 he helped design and implement the new Polish pension system while serving as the Director of the Office for Social Security Reform.*

*Mr. Rutkowski's published work covers among others, issues on labor markets and social security. He was a core team member of the 1995 World Development Report "Workers in an Integrated World"- the World Bank's annual flagship research publication.*

*Mr. Rutkowski holds an M.Sc. and Ph.D from Warsaw School of Economics and finished his post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics. He also graduated from the Executive Development program at the Harvard Business School in 1999, and from the*

*Leadership for Collective Intelligence program run by Dialogos in 2010.*

*Prior to joining the World Bank, he helped design the Polish pension system while serving as the Director of the Office for Social Security Reform. He also taught at the Institute of Economic Policy at the Warsaw School of Economics.*

*Mr. Rutkowski holds a Ph.D from Warsaw School of Economics and a Master's degree from the London School of Economics.*



*Mahesh Uttamchandani  
Practice Manager, Financial Inclusion, Infrastructure &  
Access in the Finance, Competitiveness, and Innovation  
Global Practice, World Bank Group*

*Mahesh Uttamchandani is the Practice Manager for Financial Inclusion, Infrastructure & Access in the Finance, Competitiveness, and Innovation Global Practice at the World Bank Group. He manages Payment & Market Infrastructures, Responsible Financial Access, Credit Infrastructure, the global Financial Inclusion Support Framework program, the global Financial Consumer Protection program. He also jointly leads (with an IFC co-Head) the Universal Financial Access 2020 initiative. He was previously Practice Manager for SME Access to Finance and Credit Infrastructure.*

*Mahesh also served as a Global Lead for Credit Infrastructure Global Solutions Group, where he led the WBG's work in the areas of secured transactions, credit reporting and insolvency, including the insolvency and creditor/debtor rights initiative.*

*Mahesh joined the World Bank's Legal Vice Presidency in 2006, and has since held various positions at both the World Bank and IFC*

*Prior to joining the WBG, Mahesh worked at the EBRD and as a commercial litigator at a leading Canadian law firm.*

*Mahesh is a member of the Executive Committee of CGAP, a board member of the legal journal, International Corporate Rescue, and a board member of INSOL International. He has published and taught at the university level and lectured extensively in North America, Europe and Asia.*

*World Bank Blogs*

# Taiwan, US bond to empower women

## LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS:

The two nations are partners in a regional bond project to raise funds to help create sustainable livelihoods for women in Southeast Asia

By Lu Yi-hsuan and Jonathan Chin



From left, International Cooperation and Development Fund Secretary-General Timothy Hsiang, Minister Without Portfolio John Deng, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu and American Institute in Taiwan Director Brent Christensen attend a news conference at the Executive Yuan in Taipei on December 14, 2020 announcing the Women's Livelihood Bond initiative. Photo: Tu Chien-jung, Taipei Times

Taiwan and the US have teamed up to take part in the Women's Livelihood Bond 3 (WLB3) initiative — a collaboration that American Institute in Taiwan Director William Christensen on December 14, 2020 touted as “a testament to the United States’ and Taiwan’s commitment to the shared value of promoting women’s development and prosperity.”

The partnership was announced at a news conference at the Executive Yuan in Taipei, with Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu, Executive Yuan Minister Without Portfolio John Deng and International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) Secretary-General Timothy Hsiang joining Christensen.

Created by the Singapore-based Impact Investment Exchange (IIX), the Women's Livelihood Bond Series is a series of debt securities to empower women in

Southeast Asia by creating sustainable livelihoods, officials said at the event.

WLB3 — the third tranche in the US\$150 million four-part initiative — would assist 175,000 to 185,000 female entrepreneurs and socioeconomically disadvantaged women in Indonesia, India, Cambodia and the Philippines by financing loans, marketing and production and living expenses, they said.

Taiwan is participating in the WLB3 as a responsible member of the international community, and to reinforce ties in the region and bolster the government's New Southbound Policy, as well as strategic cooperation with the US in the Indo-Pacific region, Wu said.

“The US-Taiwan collaboration on the Women's Livelihood Bond builds upon our existing cooperation on several successful platforms and initiatives, such as the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, the

Women's Economic Empowerment Summit, and our collaboration in APEC," Christensen said.

"We often describe our relationship with Taiwan with the phrase: 'Real friends, real progress — zhen pengyou, zhen jinzhan. But this is not just about advancing US-Taiwan ties. It is about like-minded partners standing together to promote common values and shared interests," he said.

"We are proud to stand with Taiwan and other like-minded partners to promote, support and foster women's economic empowerment around the world," he said.

The WLB series exemplifies the new international paradigm of seeing public-private collaboration as a more powerful form of aid to developing countries, Deng said.

WLB3 demonstrates the results of Taiwan-US Infrastructure Finance Framework and Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue, he added.

Hsiang hailed WLB3 as a landmark case in the fund's utilization of innovative financial instruments,

adding that the initiative aims to meet the UN's sustainable development goals.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, WLB3 microfinancing would encourage female entrepreneurs to engage in domestic manufacturing that breaks the cycle of poverty and fosters economic resilience, he said.

As Taiwanese private investors have yet to take part in the WLB3, the ICDF is inviting them to consider purchasing WLB Series securities, he said.

The ICDF in November 2020 signed an agreement with IIX to contribute US\$3 million to WLB3's US\$27.7 million debt securities, which closed on December 10, officials said.

WLB1 raised US\$8.5 million, while WLB2 raised US\$12 million, they said, adding that the US International Development Finance Corp were among the investors, while Australia provided technical support.

*Taipei Times*

## How to help women workers affected by COVID-19

*By Steven Beck*



*COVID-19 has changed the workplace. Many of these changes could be used to help level the playing field for women.*

**T**he pandemic's long-term effects on how we work and live could accelerate the progress made in recent years on gender equality.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the working lives of just about everyone, but early evidence shows it has hit women the hardest. There is opportunity in the mix of measures forced upon companies and workers, however, and some could help

advance the role of women once current restrictions are lifted.

The pandemic can't be allowed to set back the progress made thus far. Instead, changes such as more flexible working hours and work-from-home need to be examples carried over to increase the pace of improvements.

Getting more women into the paid workforce and making it a more equitable place once they are there has long been both a social and economic goal worth pursuing for Asia. But this goal remains unfulfilled.

In developing countries in Asia, the labor force participation rate of women is 50% compared to 82% for men. Women continue to do most of the domestic and unpaid care work, and they also have too few decision-making roles in government and business.

Getting more women into the paid workforce makes economic sense, leads to diversity of thinking in the workplace, and improves the bottom line. Evidence abounds on how advancing gender equality will lead to greater economic growth.

In Asia and Pacific, per capita income would rise by 30.6% after one generation, and 71.1% after two, by cutting down on time wasted for women and girls, promoting education and training, and increasing women's labor market participation, according to a 2016 ADB study.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for meeting Asia's ambitions for inclusive growth and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Gender equality needs to be pursued not only for a just and equal society, but also for inclusive growth and faster poverty reduction.

Schools and daycares are closed in many countries, while workers have been sent home to work remotely. That has left many women doing double duty--bearing the brunt of childcare and education while trying to do their regular jobs as well.

Flexible work arrangements such as those now in place in much of the world have long been a sought-after measure by those promoting greater gender equality. According to a study for the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, companies are likely to agree to more flexible work conditions even when the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

At the same time, in households where women are in "essential" positions such as nurses or grocery store workers, many men have inevitably turned into the main providers of childcare. And when men are forced into those roles, the share of responsibilities they take on tends to stick, noted the report, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality."

Still, in many households it is the women who have taken on the brunt of the extra work.

That's why it is so important that efforts to improve the workforce as a place where women can thrive need to be redoubled once conditions return to a more normal state of play.

Bank jobs are a good place to start. They are among the most sought-after positions in developing countries in Asia. Generally, the workforce employed at local banks are the educated and elite in society. Progress in gender issues in banking can serve as an example for other sectors to follow and improve the banks themselves in the process.

Twenty banks from nine countries are working with ADB's Trade Finance Program on this issue. This

has included establishing for the first time the extent to which human resources policies and gender strategies at banks in developing countries in Asia contribute to gender equality.

In general, banks in developing Asia have taken on the idea that improving the role of women will help their operations. They express interest in enhancing gender equality and leveraging the talents of women to drive growth.

But across Asia the level of effort being put into these goals varies widely, as it does throughout society.

Financial markets and banking are still in an early growth period in many developing countries in Asia. That means there is an opportunity to introduce best practices in gender equity—introducing statistical analysis of pay and representation of women in the workforce for example—before operating methods are entrenched.

Developing countries in Asia could in this way find themselves with a leg up on western banking, where this sort of statistical analysis is also quite patchy.

Governments could play more of a role, in the banking industry as well as the rest of society. Banks in the developing world are among the most responsible companies when it comes to strictly following local labor laws. But if those laws don't reflect gender equity goals, it will be more of a task to get the job done.

Updating laws would be a good start. But companies in the financial industry also need to look inward to analyse their own human resources policies and craft plans to improve gender balances (both pay and staff representation). Help is available, from ADB and elsewhere.

As we found when we started our work with banks on these issues, officials are interested and eager to make advances.

The pandemic and its longer-term effects on how we work and live could either boost or dent what progress we've made on gender equality. Now is a good time to build on the advances made over the past few years.

*About the Author:*



*Steven Beck  
Head of Trade Finance, ADB*

*Mr. Beck has managed the exponential growth of ADB's Trade Finance Program, and implemented its first supply chain finance business. Prior to joining ADB, he worked for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and was an advisor to the Canadian Minister of Finance.*

Mr. Beck played a key role in the start-up of the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank, and was a consultant for USAID in Southern Africa and for a start-up financial institution in Armenia. Mr. Beck is on the Advisory Board of the International Chamber of

Commerce Banking Commission, and a member of the WTO Working Group for Trade Finance.

Asian Development Blog

## 2020 'Women Make Waves Film Festival' Opens In Taipei

By Catherine Weng

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the movie industry has been affected all over the world.

Yet the Women Make Waves Film Festival (WMWFF), in Taiwan has found a way to survive.

At its opening last night in Taipei on October 16<sup>th</sup>, the festival showcased its opening gala, and its opening film: Maternal.

The opening gala was stacked with big wheels from different fields, as well as film fans from Taiwan and around the globe.

In opening the festival, chairwoman, WANG Chun-Chi talked about the concept of this year's event, "Femture", the idea of feminism, combining with the shape of the future.

WANG stressed the close and inseparable connection between the "future" and "past memory".

When our world has been brought to a grinding halt, and people are looking forward to the future, we have to keep reminding ourselves that we have to move heaven and earth to create a brighter future of our own making.

While moving forward, never forget the imprinting of history and past memory.

By thinking of these can we truly create a future in the shape of hope.



The Opening Gala.

Director-General, Pecha LO, in her own allotted time in the spotlight mentioned the lack of foreign directors and filmmakers making it to Taiwan due to the virus.

The WMWFF does still have an international feel in it presenting two international programs in cooperation with The National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Film Center, and the Bureau Français de Taipei.

Added to this, the opening film is a remarkable Argentine film set to a backdrop of 1960s New Argentine Aesthetics.



The chairwoman, WANG Chun-Chi, opens proceedings.

The director, Maura DELPERO, revealed the cruel reality of the times with her extreme and impressing tender movie linguistics; a way to soothe people in chaotic times.

Maternal brings audiences into a paradoxical world inhabited by two teen moms struggling with their maternity and responsibilities toward their children, and the nun, Sister Paola, who seems to be a woman of strong maternal values, also going through her own struggle with her vow of chastity.

Besides the plot and the setting, the director presents us with more paradoxes over the course of the movie.



Director-General, Pecha LO, speaking to attendees.

The contrasting personality of the two teen moms, the distinction between those teens and nuns living together, and even at the beginning of the movie, how Sister Paola and Lu first being introduced which creates a strong contrast of image and sense.

These paradoxes remind audiences that we all live in a paradoxical world, where tensions and conflicts happening daily, where issues and struggles occur every single moment of every single day.

These may be small like the identity struggles faced by an individual, such as the main characters, or larger as in the as of-yet-unsolved problems in society; in this case the increasing numbers of teen moms in Argentina.

The movie flows moderately with an underlying dramatic tension.

This tension is based on the individual character's inner conflicts, and the external conflicts between Lu and Sister Paola, which combine at times, and affects both.

Although the issues of family and maternity can be tough and serious, with the aesthetic scenes and shots, the movie will definitely soothe your heart as a mother soothes a child.

“The frames represent the world, ethnicity, the family, and the individual. The watch establishes the connection between past, present, and future. It visualizes how people attempt to explore what the future will look like.”

This is the concept portrayed in the “Femture” poster.

Although it is called “ ‘Women’ ” Makes Waves” Film Festival, and features movies overseen by female directors, the concept and idea is to bring to people more than that.



*Opening Film, Maternal. Fati and Lu.*



*Paola and Nina sleeping.*

It is about gender, but in a much more holistic view than so often seen.

The festival presents family issues, gender issues, and feminism in a range of different cultural wrappings, and conforming to the times.

The figures of women are elusive, trying to break the usual stereotypes and leave the audience with interpretations requiring thought and consideration.

Each has their own story and way of creating the future – looking back to the past, and reflecting in the present.



*2020 Women Make Waves Film Festival, Femture.*

*The Taiwan Times*





# Digital lifeline for women running Asia's small businesses

By Beh Lih Yi

When the coronavirus stopped her husband working, Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc's small business of selling cosmetics from home became the main income for this Vietnamese family of four.

But her business took a hit as, unlike many micro-entrepreneurs, she could not exploit online platforms and deliveries beyond her personal Facebook page.

Ngoc is typical of millions of small business women in the region who are keen to earn but feel locked out of a digital revolution that has mostly helped young men in cities.

"I don't know how to use Facebook to attract more customers. It was a real headache," the 39-year-old mother told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Vinh Phuc province, near the capital Hanoi.

Now help is at hand, offering hope of a way through the crisis and laying the foundations for better business beyond.

Ngoc will get digital training under a scheme for 200,000 people across Southeast Asia, part of efforts to close a digital gap that mostly hurts women and those in rural communities.

## DIGITAL GAP

The coronavirus pandemic has threatened businesses around the globe, but the lack of digital know-how has exacerbated the risk for small businesses, many led by women in Southeast Asia.

Although lockdowns have eased in many cities, experts said continued social distancing would push more businesses online, highlighting a need for digital skills among vulnerable groups.

The \$3.3-million programme starts next month and is funded by Google. Most trainees are women and young entrepreneurs, spanning 10 countries including Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.



"The importance of digital literacy has never been greater," said Marija Ralic from Google.org, philanthropic arm of the U.S. tech giant which gives more than \$100 million in grants each year to support innovation and technology.



"We know the current outbreak has left many businesses in vulnerable situations, especially those in rural and under-served communities," said the head of its Asia-Pacific office.

Training covers a host of skills, be it how to pin a business site on a map, use chat messaging or beef up security.

For Thai seamstress Noraeri Thungmueangthong, an indigenous entrepreneur who sells traditional woven clothes, the digital training could inject new life into her ancient craft.

"We sell about five pieces a month now. I hope technology can help my business grow and help our community," said the 45-year-old from the ethnic Karen group, a hill tribe people.

## WOMEN LOCKED OUT

The Asia Foundation, a U.S.-based charity that runs the training, said the region's most connected citizens were urban men and it was important to ensure women were not left behind.

Boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls and the proportion of women using the internet globally is 48%, against 58% of men, according to the United Nations.

Yet U.N. data shows there are more than 61 million women entrepreneurs who own and run businesses across Southeast Asia.

"They often don't get as many opportunities," Meloney Lindberg, who leads the initiative at the charity, said by phone from Cambodia. "What we are doing is to bring the opportunity to their neighbourhood."

*Thomson Reuters Foundation*

# Funding Women Entrepreneurs on Mongolia's Covid Front Line

By Soomin Jun and Saranzaya Gerelt-Od



*A Tsagaan Sar (New Year) sales event in 2018. Small businesses that depend on these sales often take out loans to stock up on inventory in the weeks before the holiday, and the unexpected lockdown this year has left them overstocked and in debt.*

Mongolia was one of the first countries in the world to adopt strict Covid-19 containment measures, starting with a January 27 halt to air and land travel between China and Mongolia, school closings, and a ban on gatherings. Eventually, all commercial flights to Mongolia were stopped, and so far this has miraculously limited the number of infections to slightly over 200, with no confirmed cases of community transmission.

Mongolia's economy has been a different story. Economic growth—a respectable 5.1 percent in 2019—is expected to fall sharply in 2020. The OECD originally forecast that Mongolia's 2020 economy would grow at 5.4 percent, but in May it revised its estimate dramatically downward, to minus 1 percent. The nation's heavy reliance on export earnings from extractive industries makes matters worse. This lack of diversification is likely to hobble employment, investment, productivity, and longer-term recovery from the pandemic in an economic future that is "subject to unprecedented uncertainty" for Mongolia and many other developing nations.

While the government quickly adopted expansionary monetary and fiscal policies—lowering interest rates, for example, and exempting the public from social insurance taxes for six months—Mongolia still faces serious macroeconomic challenges, including growing national debt, declining tax revenues, and falling commodity prices. This bleak outlook, and the country's strong measures against Covid-19, have created a challenging business environment for all Mongolian entrepreneurs, but it has been especially difficult for women.

The majority of the female labor force in Mongolia

is concentrated in the retail and service sectors, which are sensitive to downturns in consumer spending like those in the current crisis. While the government's Covid-19 stimulus package includes relief for small businesses, none is designated specifically for women. The Asia Foundation conducted a rapid survey of a sample of businesswomen at Mongolia's Women's Business Center (WBC) in Ulaanbaatar, established in 2016 with support from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). All 30 businesswomen surveyed said they were struggling, as revenues dried up, to keep their businesses open, keep up with accruing costs, and pay employee salaries.



*Chuluuntsetseg selling her signature bed linens at a WBC event before the Tsagaan Sar holiday in 2018.*

The women surveyed also cited the additional burden of being primary caregivers for their families while trying to keep their businesses alive. Schools and kindergartens have been closed since January, and many families have no backup plan for childcare. Confinement

at home has been challenging and in some cases dangerous, as increased domestic violence has significantly affected women and children's safety since the lockdown.

But now for a rare moment of positive news: The Asia Foundation's Mongolia office recently rolled out several strategies to equip WBC clients to endure and operate in this environment. The Foundation's the Lotus Rapid Response Fund provided critical survival tools, including emergency cash grants, a direct hotline for women experiencing psychological or social problems, mentorships to guide businesses in the transition to online sales, and a public information partnership with the Ulaanbaatar police department to disseminate information on domestic violence.

Small entrepreneur Chuluuntsetseg is among the businesswomen receiving assistance from the Lotus Rapid Response Fund. One of 47 graduates of the WBC's business incubator, she launched a sewing business producing bed linens and blankets, but when the border with China closed, she lost her source of raw materials. Her business received another blow when the government, for the first time in literally centuries, canceled the February celebration of Tsagaan Sar, the Mongolian Lunar New Year. This is a holiday when people spend lavishly on gifts, and small businesses that depend on these Tsagaan Sar sales often take out loans to stock up on inventory in the weeks before the holiday. When the lockdown began at the end of January, the celebration was scrapped, leaving businesses overstocked and in debt.

Chuluuntsetseg's business was one of them. Her profitability collapsed. She received no assistance from the government, she told us, either as a small business or as a disabled person. She had no choice but to close her business down. Many other women entrepreneurs also closed up shop, either temporarily or indefinitely. Most of the women from the WBC employed other women, and their business closures had a devastating domino effect.



*The Women's Business Center helped Chuluuntsetseg keep her small business, which almost failed during the pandemic.*

The Rapid Response Fund stepped in with \$500 emergency grants to Chuluuntsetseg and 15 other women entrepreneurs. With just this minimal support, Chuluuntsetseg was able to find new, local suppliers for her raw materials. She shifted her product line to include cotton masks and gloves to address the nationwide shortage of personal protective equipment. She worked with mentors to expand her online sales, including using Facebook's "boost" option and the WBC's new online shopping mall instead of relying on the government's product expos, which have been canceled during the pandemic.

More than 6,000 women entrepreneurs are now registered with the WBC, most of them severely affected by the pandemic. Working inside the WBC, we see firsthand and every day the unique barriers women entrepreneurs face, and that they warrant dedicated support programs during this extraordinary crisis. We have made a good start by sustaining a small group of female-led businesses, and we hope support follows for the many more entrepreneurs who fuel Mongolia's economic engine.

*The Asia Foundation*

## **Covid-19 stops rising women entrepreneurs in their tracks**

They are involved in sectors such as tourism, food service, agriculture and manufacturing enterprises that require daily transactions to stay afloat.

*By Aditi Aryal*

**M**adhu Maya Bashyal runs a home stay in Tansen, a scenic hilltop town in west central Nepal. Her husband was a former migrant worker who lived in Kuwait for 18 years. He was very unhappy there, and Bashyal decided to start a business of her own so she could make enough to allow

him to return home.

The 37-year-old entrepreneur launched a series of business ventures, including a clothing retail store and brokerage firm, all of which were unsuccessful.

In 2018, the couple opened a home stay from their house where guests would come and stay and enjoy a

cultural experience, which proved to be extremely popular with foreigners.

The couple began to work hard together, and their business prospered. Their home stay was fully booked for two years by Japanese nationals who were working in Tansen.

total businesses in various sectors such as hospitality and tourism, food service, agriculture and manufacturing enterprises.

“Big businesses are diversified, meaning they have multiple fall back options,” Nivita Pradhan, vice-president - women, Nepalese Young Entrepreneurs’



*Women face additional challenges to obtain finance since they do not hold property to put up as collateral, and are not in a position to obtain the government’s collateral-free loan incentives.  
The Kathmandu Post File Photo*

Buoyed by their success and anticipating a surge in international and domestic tourists in 2020, slated to be celebrated as Visit Nepal Year, Bashyal planned to expand and borrowed Rs2.2 million using her house as collateral.

“For a small business operating from home, Rs2.2 million is a lot of money,” she said. “When the pandemic hit, the Japanese nationals left in March after which there have been no guests. We were told we would be compensated, but we are yet to receive any payment.”

Bashyal has been making her monthly interest payment religiously, fearing foreclosure by her bank. She filed her annual tax return last month. Without a regular income source, she has been dipping into her savings which are receding dangerously.

A large number of women entrepreneurs like Bashyal are involved in micro, medium and small enterprises that require daily transactions to remain afloat. Covid-19 has thrown them into financial insecurity without regular income or effective social safety nets which has reversed generations of progress in women entrepreneurship in Nepal.

According to the National Economic Census conducted in 2018, women owned nearly one-third of the

Forum, told the Post. “Smaller businesses do not have the luxury, and if a firm collapses, that’s the end of it.”

In the past decade, women entrepreneurship in Nepal has come a long way.

“There were very few women entrepreneurs 10 years ago,” Darshana Shrestha, vice-president of the Federation of Women Entrepreneurship Association of Nepal, told the Post.

“Women enterprises that were operational then were seen as side businesses or hobbies for women who were primarily homemakers, and their children had grown up and they had more free time. Most of these enterprises operated in sectors such as handicrafts or pickle making, stereotypically portrayed as women enterprises.”

In Nepal, societal constraints hint towards gender discriminatory cultural beliefs and practices, which has graver repercussions for women in entrepreneurship because the playing field has never been even.

According to Pradhan, women face additional challenges to obtain finance since they do not hold property to put up as collateral, and are not in a position to obtain the government’s collateral-free loan incentives.

“Most women do not have knowledge about such benefits, and even if they do, most banks have been found to reject applications of even viable businesses. The government’s incentives look great on paper, but have not been translated into practice effectively.”

Pabitra Gaire is a farmer. The 31-year-old former Maoist combatant is perhaps the only woman in Arghali who practises commercial agriculture. Upon voluntary retirement from the People’s Liberation Army, she received some money which she wanted to invest. She additionally took some loans from a cooperative and leased 15 ropanis to establish dairy and vegetable farms. Her business was going very well, but the pandemic and lockdown took their toll. After vehicles stopped plying, transporting her products to market has been a challenge.

“Before the pandemic, I was selling about 90 litres of milk per day,” Gaire told the Post. “Now, I hardly sell 40 litres. When the lockdown was temporarily lifted, I sold some beans that had been harvested; but after that, my land has been barren. I have been waiting for seeds, fertilisers and cattle feed for about a month now, but they have not yet arrived.”

Selling her produce online is not an immediate solution because she does not have adequate know-how of doing it herself, and neither do a lot of people in her locality.

Like for Gaire, selling products online is not feasible for many businesses. “The commission charged by online sites is huge; and for traditional businesses like handicrafts and pickles, traditionally owned by women,

that is too expensive,” Pradhan told the Post.

“My successful business has been a way to prove that women entrepreneurs are on the same footing as men. I know the men around here respect me because I am a hardworking farmer, and I make a lot of money,” said Gaire. “I’ve also been told that they think I am intimidating because I deliver my produce on my motorbike.”

The financial security that comes with entrepreneurship helps women see upward mobility in their social, political, and familial status. “With money, women have increased control over decision making and are likely to suffer less abuse from their partners,” Shrestha told the Post.

While the lockdown may have hit their businesses hard and they are struggling to remain afloat, entrepreneurs are more resilient than ever. Both Gaire and Bashyal have in the past been recognised as outstanding entrepreneurs in Palpa, and have received felicitations from the local government with the support of Daayitwa, an NGO that promotes youth entrepreneurship.

“My business has been hugely affected, but I am optimistic about kick-starting it again,” entrepreneur Bashyal told the Post. “When I had nothing, I built this business on my own to bring my husband back. I am not willing to send him back.”

*The Kathmandu Post*

## Iran, Japan discuss joint project on women's empowerment



**T**he Iranian Vice Presidency for Women’s and Family Affairs and the Japanese Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) held the third meeting of a joint project on women's empowerment through video

conference on June 23, 2020.

The Sasakawa Peace Foundation has worked over the past 10 years to promote constructive ties with Iran through a range of projects including joint research,

mutual visits, and dialogues on different issues such as women's empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women's and family affairs; Morteza Rahmani Movahed, ambassador of Iran to Japan; and representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attended the meeting, IRNA reported.

Nobuo Tanaka, chairman of the SPF; Atsushi Sunami, president of the Ocean Policy Research of the SPF; Mitsugu Saito, Japanese ambassador to Iran; and several directors of the SPF joined the meeting from Japan.

A review of joint actions conducted last year, proposals on the type of cooperation in the post-corona period, and the creation of appropriate conditions for employment and women's entrepreneurship and the

experiences of both sides were among the issues discussed during the meeting.

During the video conference, a joint research report on the comparative study of women entrepreneurs in Iran and Japan, women and information and communication technology, as well as a joint project report on home businesses were presented.

The meeting also discussed plans for the role of women in the post-corona period, the development of home-based businesses using the experiences of the Indonesian government, and women's access to information and communication technology for economic growth.

*Tehran Times*

## **SHE Investments to support women entrepreneurs on digital literacy skills**

*By Sok Chan*



*SHE Investments joins as Cambodian partner for Youth Business International to train women entrepreneurs on digital literacy skills. Supplied*

**S**HE Investments, a social enterprise to support women micro-small entrepreneurs, has joined as the Cambodian partner for Youth Business International's rapid response recovery Programme, funded by Google.Org, to support women entrepreneurs to build digital literacy skills to enable them to recover and rebuild from the Covid-19 crisis.

The program, led by Youth Business International (YBI) and funded by Google.org, Google's philanthropic arm, will support underserved micro, small and medium businesses to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

SHE Investments has been confirmed as YBI's delivery partner for Cambodia, and over the next five

months, will work with a project team to develop and deliver digital literacy training and support for Khmer women entrepreneurs struggling in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

"Businesses now need to focus on recovering and rebuilding from this initial economic shock", says Celia Boyd, co-founder and Managing Director of SHE Investments—Cambodia's first and only business incubator and accelerator for women that is delivered in Khmer language, by Khmer women.

Celia added that there is a significant gap in digital literacy skills in Cambodia, and those of us supporting entrepreneurs need to re-focus our efforts on building the

skills which will enable business owners to adapt their business models, and to be able to access online resources.

SHE's Digital Literacy program will be delivered an intensive Digital Literacy Skills training program for 40 selected women with MSMEs affected by COVID-19.

This program will be delivered for 2 cohorts (20 women each), over 5 days (1 day every 2 weeks), focusing on a range of topics including Crisis Management, Social Media, Financial Management and Forecasting, Using Smartphones Effectively, and Online search Tools such as Google, free website builders, etc.

*Khmer Times*

## India's women entrepreneurs see survival by remodeling business

*Bloomberg*  
By Shwetha Sunil

**M**ost female entrepreneurs in Indian cities were quick to change their business model and predict their operations will survive after the coronavirus pandemic ravaged revenues, according to a new study.

Bain & Co., Google, and AWE Foundation surveyed almost 350 women entrepreneurs and small businesses and found that 54% had already made business shifts -- including new products or services -- and another 24% planned to change by December. About 90% said they believe they will survive the crisis.

Covid-19 had a disproportionate impact on women all over the world. In India, which has a vast gender gap across almost all social indicators, women are even more vulnerable. The South Asian nation has as many as 16 million women-owned businesses, fewer than 20% of all enterprises, with most of them largely single-person operations, making survival crucial.

Women-owned businesses saw a sharp decline in revenue: 73% reported being negatively impacted by the pandemic, and almost 20% were nearly wiped out, according to the survey.

The changes made in business models include releasing new products or services, digital sales and delivery channels, as well as reorienting supply chains, sales and marketing. Some 60% of the businesses reported including new products and services, while 46% of entrepreneurs focused on retraining and learning new skills.

"Post the initial few months, there has been rapid

responsiveness," said Megha Chawla, a partner at Bain and the study's lead author. "A few characteristics of women-owned enterprises in India, such as being service-oriented, smaller and less capital-intensive, enabled faster adaptation."



*Some 60% of the businesses reported including new products and services, while 46% of entrepreneurs focused on retraining and learning new skills.*

*Photo credit: iStock.*

*The Economic Times*

## Training on cooperatives to empower Turkey's female entrepreneurs

**W**omen will soon find new opportunities for entrepreneurship thanks to a series of cooperatives set up by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services.

The "Empowerment of Women Through Cooperatives" project aims to increase the number of

cooperatives that allow women to join forces for self-employment. Minister Zehra Zümüt Selçuk said in a written statement on August 5, 2020 that the project would play a part in the government's goals to boost women's employment as a joint project between her

ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Commerce.

The government has already held workshops across the country for women's cooperatives and reached out to more than 23,000 people. In the past two years, 81 new women's cooperatives were established while Social Solidarity Centers have been set up by the government, providing incentives and assistance to women seeking to form cooperatives.

Initially, 3,500 women will be trained while 1,500 who have already joined or formed cooperatives will receive extra training. "We plan to set up a pool of advisers for 1,000 women and offer them consultation on how to form cooperatives as well," Selçuk said.

The government has increased loans and incentives for female entrepreneurs in recent years to help boost their participation in the male-dominated workforce,

rolling out a series of incentives for working women, from longer maternity leaves to financial support for daycare needs, as well as payments to grandparents caring for their grandchildren who have working parents.

As for female entrepreneurs, the government already provides up to TL 50,000 (\$7,110) in loans and plans to extend them to more women willing to set up their own businesses.

The female employment rate in the country fluctuates at around 30%. Turkey aims to boost it to at least 34% by 2023.

*Daily Sabah*



*A group of women pose with food they produce in their cooperative in Düzce province, northwestern Turkey, March 8, 2020. (AA Photo)*

## **Startup trains underskilled women in AI for free in partnership with UN Women**

*By Jonathan Castillo*

**W**ith the Philippines bracing itself for the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), one social impact tech startup is making sure that Filipino women are prepared for the inevitable changes.

Philippines-based startup Connected Women creates opportunities for both skilled and underskilled women by training them to be data annotators, which are considered to be essential in any program that uses AI.

Labeling and categorizing images can earn data annotators around P500 per day, depending on their output. This is more than what many Filipino women earn in the informal economy due to lack of education

or access to decent jobs. Outside NCR, the minimum wage ranges from P200 to P400 a day.

The training is part of the #WomenRiseAboveCovid program in partnership with the joint EU-UN Women program WeEmpowerAsia. This initiative is one of two tracks with the other focused on helping women business owners during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Founder Gina Romero said that the reputation of Filipinos for being hard working will help us stand out in this fast-growth market.

"As long as we keep advocating for the training, the tools, the knowledge, and the awareness about



these types of opportunities, I think this industry will surely grow,” Romero said.

Connected Women plans to train 200 women by the end of the year and 1,000 more by 2021.

### **Data labeling as a promising new outsourcing market**

With more and more companies around the world using AI for their operations, the reality is that these machines still need to “learn”. This is where data labeling comes in. The process uses human intervention to train AI applications by labeling data such as images, text, or voice. The data is then labeled by the AI and verified by a human so that it can further improve its accuracy.

This industry is expected to be valued at more than USD 1 billion at the end of 2023 and USD 1.6 billion by the end of 2025. Countries like India, Romania, and the Philippines have started to jump on the bandwagon, employing thousands to work for companies such as Google, Microsoft, Walmart, General Motors, and more.

Connected Women started as a platform where entrepreneurs from all over the world can look for high-quality Filipina talent. Foreseeing this new demand from tech giants who need the services of data labelers, they have expanded their programs to include training women to become adept data annotators.

The Connected Women community consists of over 70,000 members with the majority coming from Philippine megacities like Manila, Cebu, and Davao. Connected Women are trying to reach smaller communities too, with the help of private sector partners and local government units.

During this pandemic, however, there is one unifying factor among these women – most of them were affected by the lockdown and sought other means of income during these trying times.

Seventy members were selected to be part of the initial pilot training for “Elevate AIDA (Artificial Intelligence Data Annotation)” where they were trained in basic data labeling skills such as image identification, classification, and categorization. These are women who previously did not have any knowledge of AI or data labeling.

UN Women’s Ma. Rosalyn Mesina, WeEmpowerAsia Philippines Country Program Manager, said that she is very happy to support this project and provide more opportunities for Filipino women to access decent and fair jobs.

She is hopeful that the pilot training supported by UNW WeEmpowerAsia will encourage other partners and private sector groups to consider investing in such programs which can open pathways for more women towards financial and income security, enabling them to contribute to the socio-economic wellbeing of their families and communities.



With the strengthening of the country’s internet infrastructure presenting a growing opportunity for those in far-flung communities who benefit from online work the most, Connected Women also partnered with the likes of the Department of Information and Communications Technology, Globe Telecom and Facebook, to provide access to the necessary training, tools and connectivity to make their initiative a success.

According to Yoly Crisanto, Globe Sustainability Officer and SVP for Corporate Communications, developing skills in digital technology becomes more important and those who can learn this will reap the benefits, especially because of the new normal.

“Globe is at the forefront of enabling digitalization as such we believe this initiative will help empower women by providing them with the necessary tools that can aid their training even while they are at home,” Crisanto said.

### **Flexible work as the future in the “new normal” landscape**

One of the participants of the pilot test was Ida, a single mother and a working student. Because of the lockdown, Ida not only needs to provide for her two young children but also take care of them and do her daily chores around the house.

Her greatest challenge was looking for work that would allow her to stay home with her children. “It gives opportunities to single mothers like me who have a hard time looking for work,” she said.

Janette, a former OFW who got displaced because of COVID-19, is another participant who said that she will recommend this work to her friends and family.

She was working in Qatar but had to come back to the Philippines because of the pandemic. Because of opportunities such as data labeling, which can be done online, women like Janette have a choice not to leave the country.

Another trainee is an 18-year-old juvenile stroke survivor, Rica. She was 16 when she had an Ischemic stroke which she felt limited her career options.

During the lockdown, she decided that she needed a job that she could do at home and will allow her enough flexibility as she continues with her physical therapy.

“I learned and discovered a lot of jobs I can do even while working from home. I also did not feel discriminated against,” Rica said.

With a daily pay of around P500 for categorizing batches of images, all the participants agreed that this was a reasonable rate. Tasks can be carried out at any time.

As an online job, data labeling falls into the broad category of “flexible work” that enables people to work the hours they would like, from anywhere in the world. This also gives corporations access to a global talent pool. Workers, on the other hand, can avoid the hassle of travel by working from home and have more flexibility to take care of household responsibilities.

Experts are saying that flexible work is the

future of most industries in the “new normal” which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Businesses have been forced to implement a work-from-home policy, illuminating the effectiveness of this work arrangement.

Romero said that more and more women are seeing this type of work as an alternative to their corporate jobs. In fact, the whole country seems to be considering this “new normal” as a viable career option. The Philippines is currently ranked as the 6th fastest-growing freelance market, with a 35% growth from 2019.

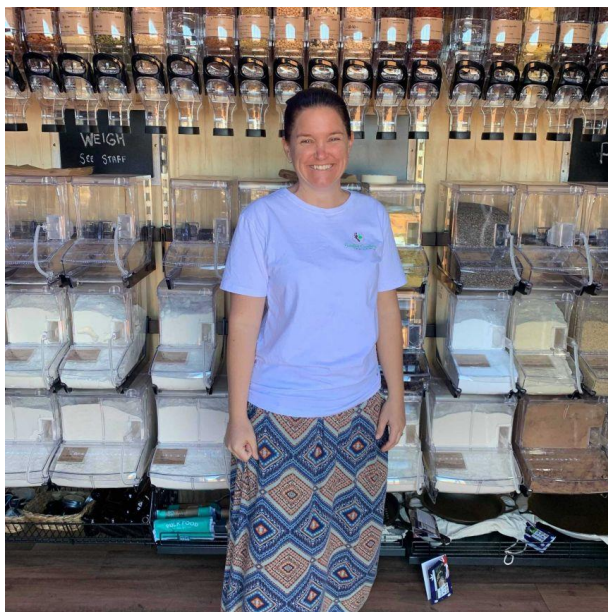
“Our members want to learn about the different types of remote work and what skills they can bring online,” Romero said.

As an advocate of technology and the opportunities that platforms like Connected Women create, Romero believes that technology can be empowering for women at all levels.

*Manila Bulletin*

## Small businesses run by women are booming in the Pilbara

*By Susan Standen*



*Lana Armstrong in her wholefoods truck at Karratha's 'Dreamer's Hill'  
(Supplied: Lana Armstrong).*

**F**emale entrepreneurs are thriving in the Pilbara, providing goods and services that may otherwise be hard to come by in the remote West Australian region.

The lack of wholefood options in Karratha, where only two major supermarket chains bring food 1,600 kms

from Perth, prompted Lana Armstrong to start her own business.

Ms Armstrong sells her wares — including wholefoods, menstrual cups, and underwear — out of the back of a truck parked on the weekends at Dreamers Hill, alongside a mobile meat truck and fish truck.

"Everything is whole food or organic products with minimal packaging," she said.

"We're all about low waste, reducing what goes in your rubbish bin — anything that isn't going to put chemicals into your body, basically, internally or externally."

As a former banker, Ms Armstrong is well-equipped to run the books for the business, but growth has forced her to think about employing two young local women.

### 'A lot of opportunity'

Cassandra Doyle has the only yoga studio in Karratha and says one of her biggest challenges is finding enough teachers in the town.

"My experience in the Pilbara is that there are many, many amazing women who are brought here with their partners or husbands and there is a lot of opportunity," said Ms Doyle.

"This is an area that I find receptive to small business and supporting small business.

"I've had far more friends that are willing to commence their own business and launch into entrepreneurship than any other region I've lived in."

Wendy Drew established a Pilates studio in Karratha after many years of being a personal trainer in Tom Price.



*Cassandra Doyle runs the only bricks-and-mortar yoga studio in Karratha (ABC Pilbara: Susan Standen).*

She trains teachers to work in her business while looking after her own teenage children.

"I love mat work and I love reformer," she said.

"I wanted a place where we could do both."



*Wendy Drew's Pilates studio in Karratha (Supplied: Wendy Drew).*

### International trade

Sonal Chaudhary said her aid worker parents inspired her to start her own ethical clothing design business, which employs women in rural India who would otherwise have no work or income.

Ms Chaudhary said she decided to pursue her business instead of practising medicine after she gave birth to her daughter.

She hired a tailor, manager and several women to work in the business from India, where her cotton fabrics are block-printed and dyed using traditional artisan methods.

She says part of her goal is to empower women and keep Indian artisan cultural traditions alive.

"Growing up I watched my widowed grandmother struggle to raise her five children because she was illiterate," Ms Chaudhary said.

She also wants to contribute to the slow fashion movement in a sustainable way. "Fast fashion is killing our environment — the average American buys 68 items per year, of which only 3 per cent get reused."

### Mining town business boom

According to demographer Bernard Salt, 43 per cent of small businesses in Karratha are run by women.

In South Hedland and Ashburto



*Sonal Chaudhary runs Tara and the Tigre (ABC Pilbara: Susan Standen).*

n those figures are even higher, at 47 and 49 per cent, respectively.

He says mining towns have the highest concentrations of female business owners and managers, largely due to the support they receive from partners who work in the resources industries.

"There's more than two million small business owners across Australia and it is rising more than 65,000 per year," Mr Salt said.

"Half the women in the workforce in the Pilbara region are female business owners or business managers.

"Women are far more highly represented in the business ownership and business management of these resources communities."

*ABC News*



## **ABOUT CACCI**

*The Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CACCI) is a regional grouping of apex national chambers of commerce and industry, business associations and business enterprises in Asia and the Western Pacific.*

*It is a non-governmental organization (NGO) serving as a forum for promoting the vital role of businessmen in the region, increasing regional business interaction, and enhancing regional economic growth. Since its establishment in 1996, CACCI has grown into a network of national chamber of commerce with a total now of 29 primary Members from 27 Asian countries and independent economies. It cuts across national boundaries to link businessmen and promote economic growth throughout the Asia-Pacific region.*

*As an NGO, CACCI is granted consultative status, Roster category, under the United Nations. It is a member of the Conference on NGOs (CoNGO), an association of NGOs with UN consultative status.*

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**Ernest Lin, Director General; Amador R. Honrado, Jr., Editor**

**Wendy Yang, Assistant Editor**

**7F-2, No. 760, Sec. 4 Bade Road, Taipei 10567, Taiwan; Tel: (886 2) 2760-1139; Fax: (886 2) 2760-7569**

**Email: [cacci@cacci.org.tw](mailto:cacci@cacci.org.tw); Website: [www.cacci.biz](http://www.cacci.biz)**