



# CATALYZING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMME .

## COUNTRY BRIEF – POLICY AND GOVERNANCE COMPONENT



### Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship

Funded by Global Affairs Canada, the Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship (CWE): Creating a Gender Responsive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Programme was developed with the objective of enhancing women's economic empowerment and contributing to gender equality in Asia and the Pacific, two of ESCAP's key areas of work under its Social Development Division.

The CWE programme implements on-the-ground activities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa, and Vietnam and provides regional policy and advocacy support across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific. The programme works across three inter-connected pillars that address barriers hindering the growth of women-led enterprises: 1) enabling policy environment 2) access to finance and 3) access to ICT and business skills development.

### Partnership with Small Medium Enterprise Foundation

ESCAP entered into a strategic partnership through a formal letter of agreement (LOA) with the Small and Medium Enterprise Foundation ([SMEF](#)), the nodal agency for SME development in Bangladesh, established under the Ministry of Industry.

Bangladesh is one of the project countries where ESCAP, through the CWE Programme, built excellent synergies across the three components/pillars in partnership with SMEF, as formalized through the LOA.



# CATALYZING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMME .

## Key Progress Made

### ECOSYSTEM OF STAKEHOLDERS AND FORMALISED GOVERNANCE MECHANISM

- The programme was launched through a [national consultation](#) that brought together more than 70 participants. Participants included government leaders and policymakers from key ministries, alongside expert agencies in the areas of gender equality, SME development, trade, ICT, and finance. The national consultation provided substantive background on the issues of enabling environment for women entrepreneurs, from formal policy and regulatory environment to wider sociocultural norms and their impact on the capacity of women to engage in entrepreneurial activities. CWE's interventions in Bangladesh are based on needs expressed by stakeholders at this consultation.
- A **Project Advisory Committee (PAC)** was established, with over 20 representatives including from Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh Institute for ICT for Development, Start-Up Bangladesh and other experts in the field of gender, ICT, finance and SME development. The establishment of the PAC has resulted in the formalisation of a multi-stakeholder mechanism for engagement of diverse stakeholders beyond the traditional gender machineries in advancing the women entrepreneurs agenda and ensured ownership and sustainability of the agenda.

### EVIDENCE GENERATION

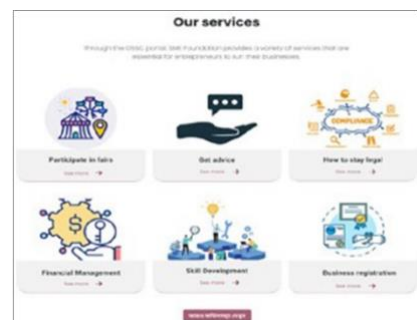
- A study on **MSME access to finance in Bangladesh** looked at demand and supply side structural financial constraints affecting MSMEs. Specifically, the study: 1) analyzed the situation of MSMEs financial access in the current policy framework; 2) identified gaps in the financial inclusion of MSMEs including gender gaps; and 3) suggested policy options and recommendations for national policymakers and other stakeholders to improve MSMEs access to and usage of appropriate financial services. The study will contribute towards developing guidelines and policy recommendations to address MSME and women MSME financing gaps.
- A study was conducted jointly with SMEF to identify and understand the constraints women entrepreneurs face during **business registration**. It highlighted critical aspects that point to gender differential barriers on both the demand and supply sides. Based on these insights, key recommendations were made including the creation of a [one-stop service center](#), both physical and digital, to support the business registration and trade licensing process.
- ESCAP and SMEF partnered with DNet to undertake **human-centered design inspired research** to explore the nuanced challenges faced by women entrepreneurs **in accessing financing** at different stages of their entrepreneurial journey and offer solutions to those challenges. DNet's research specifically explored barriers and will strengthen the scope to scale-up **social media-based women entrepreneurs** in Bangladesh. The study sought to understand the challenges and



# CATALYZING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMME .

opportunities associated with using online platforms for business growth. Based on the findings, a set of recommendations were developed on which to base future programming plans.

- The One-Stop Service Center(OSSC), titled [WE-Help](#) was officially launched in September 2023 in Dhaka in the presence of high-level officials from ESCAP and the Government of Bangladesh. Through the holistic process of identifying challenges and barriers, learning from other good practices, and being informed by women entrepreneurs themselves, WE-Help has the potential to benefit many women entrepreneurs in the coming years. By linking existing e-commerce platforms that aggregate large numbers of informal women entrepreneurs and through the services of the new OSSC, women entrepreneurs in the informal sectors can be incentivized to register and formalize.



- A **rapid policy assessment** on the barriers and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh was carried out, **including assessing the impact of COVID-19** on women entrepreneurs. The assessment has generated actionable policy recommendations on phased recovery and long-term development for the Government of Bangladesh to consider in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women-led MSMEs. It also provides guidance on specific actions needed in implementing the recently approved SME Policy particularly focusing on provisions specific to women entrepreneurs. The assessment will contribute towards building a gender-responsive business environment for women-owned MSMEs in Bangladesh.

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND POLICY SUPPORT

- On SMEF's request, ESCAP provided technical assistance to draft the first ever **Women Entrepreneurs Development Strategy 2030** for Bangladesh. The Strategy's vision is to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem which is collaborative, innovative, and empowering for women from all backgrounds to start and scale-up their enterprise development. The Strategy captures key trends and challenges in the entrepreneurial landscape and outlines strategic priorities that will be used to develop an action plan. Valuable inputs and feedback into the Strategy were gathered from stakeholders through a series of national and sub-national level consultations.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

- An **indicator framework** to track the impact of policy initiatives on women entrepreneurs at the national level was developed. 50 SMEF staff as well as women entrepreneurs received training on how to collect data and report against this framework. This investment in monitoring tools and capacities will have sustained impact in terms of measuring and tracking progress and policy impact for women-owned micro small and medium enterprises.