



# South-South Series:

## Empowering and Growing Women-led Business



### UN Women-COLEAD

#### South-South Series: Empowering and Growing Women-led Business

##### Session n°1:

Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs: Strategies for building confidence, leadership skills, and overcoming gender bias

Wednesday 19 February 2025 – 14:00-16:00 UTC

[Online \(Zoom\)](#)

Live interpretation in English and French

*The collaboration between UN Women and COLEAD targets entrepreneurs in the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries and beyond. The South-South online series are tailored for women entrepreneurs and business leaders, aiming to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing, enhance business skills and market access, and promote networking.*

### 1. Context

The agrifood sector plays a crucial role in global economies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where it is a major driver of employment and poverty alleviation. Despite their significant contributions to agricultural production, food processing, and distribution, women in the agrifood sector often face challenges rooted in gender bias. These challenges can manifest as limited access to resources, unequal opportunities for leadership, and societal expectations that hinder their potential for success and limit their participation in entrepreneurship. Gender bias in lending practices often results in women being excluded from credit opportunities, preventing them from scaling their businesses or investing in new technologies. To address these barriers and ensure sustainable development in the agrifood sector, it is essential to implement strategies that help women entrepreneurs build confidence and overcome gender bias. Cultural and societal norms often restrict women to traditional roles, limiting their ability to fully engage in economic activities such as entrepreneurship.

Overcoming gender bias requires both individual and collective action. On an individual level, women can build confidence, challenge biases, and cultivate supportive networks to navigate the obstacles they face. At the same time, collective efforts—through societal change, organizational reforms, legal advancements, and the involvement of male allies—are essential for creating an equitable environment where gender bias is no longer tolerated. Only by combining individual empowerment with collective action can we create a world where everyone, regardless of gender, has the same opportunities to succeed and thrive.



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## 2. Strategies for women entrepreneurs to overcome gender bias and build confidence

### The importance of confidence for women entrepreneurs

Confidence is crucial for entrepreneurs of all genders, but it holds particular significance for women, who often face heightened scrutiny and expectations due to their gender. For women entrepreneurs, confidence affects how they present themselves to investors, clients, and colleagues. It shapes their ability to advocate for their ideas, make tough decisions, and lead their teams. Moreover, confidence plays a vital role in overcoming challenges, as the entrepreneurial journey is often fraught with setbacks and obstacles. Without confidence, women may hesitate to take bold actions, negotiate assertively, or stand up for their businesses, all of which can impede their growth and success. Building confidence, therefore, is not just about strengthening one's belief in personal abilities; it is about overcoming societal barriers, navigating complex gender expectations, and dismantling internalized doubts that can hold women back from realizing their full potential. Despite these challenges, many women entrepreneurs have developed effective strategies to cultivate confidence and thrive in their businesses.

### Mentorship and role models

Mentorship is particularly important for women entrepreneurs, as experienced mentors can offer guidance, encouragement, and practical advice. Female mentors who have successfully navigated the agrifood sector can provide invaluable insights into how to overcome barriers, secure funding, and scale a business. Moreover, mentors can help women entrepreneurs build confidence by validating their ideas and strategies, offering encouragement, and helping them develop leadership skills.

Mentorship programs can be formalized through business associations, women's groups, or local NGOs. Virtual mentorship also plays a crucial role, especially for women in remote areas. Online platforms can connect women entrepreneurs with successful mentors from different regions or countries, providing valuable guidance regardless of geographic boundaries. By fostering solidarity and offering much-needed support, mentorship programs not only build confidence but also encourage women to pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations with greater ambition.

### Continuous learning and skill development

One of the most effective strategies for overcoming gender bias is acquiring specialized knowledge and technical skills relevant to the agrifood sector. In many rural areas, women often lack access to formal education and training in modern agricultural practices, food processing, or business management. This knowledge gap can undermine their confidence and limit their ability to run successful businesses. Women may also lack the financial literacy needed to navigate the complexities of loans, investments, and budgeting. By investing in education and training programs that focus on agrifood innovations, sustainable farming techniques, food safety, business management and financial literacy, women entrepreneurs can develop the technical expertise required to thrive in the sector. Programs should be tailored to address the specific needs of women in agriculture, offering both practical knowledge and the opportunity to apply new skills to real-world scenarios. Confidence in their technical abilities empowers women to make informed decisions, improve productivity, and innovate in their businesses. Additionally, when women can demonstrate their expertise in areas like crop production, food quality control, or marketing, they are more likely to gain respect from investors, clients, and peers, breaking down gender-based barriers to advancement.

## Networking and community building

In the agrifood sector, informal networks often serve as key sources of support, knowledge, and opportunity, especially important for women entrepreneurs, where isolation and limited resources are common obstacles. Unfortunately, women are often excluded from these networks, limiting their access to valuable resources and partnerships.

Engaging with like-minded entrepreneurs helps women feel part of a larger community, and participating in entrepreneurial networks strengthens both personal and professional confidence. These networks provide platforms for exchanging ideas, sharing best practices, and collaborating on projects. They also offer a space to discuss the unique challenges women face, reinforcing the importance of solidarity and mutual support. Networking events, industry conferences, and women-specific business groups offer valuable opportunities for forming connections that can lead to new partnerships, collaborations, and business prospects. These relationships not only expand business opportunities but also create a nurturing environment where women can encourage one another, reinforcing each other's confidence.

## Enhancing leadership skills

Leadership is essential for women entrepreneurs who wish to succeed in the agrifood sector. Effective leadership is at the heart of entrepreneurship, and for women entrepreneurs, developing leadership skills is crucial for successfully guiding teams, managing resources, and steering businesses toward long-term success. Leadership training programs, particularly those that focus on strategic thinking, risk management, and problem-solving, can help women gain the skills necessary to manage teams, negotiate deals, and drive innovation. Furthermore, learning negotiation skills is particularly important, as women entrepreneurs often face undervaluation and unequal terms in business dealings. Being able to negotiate confidently ensures that women can secure fair agreements and contracts with suppliers, clients, and investors.

## 3. Way forward

Gender bias remains a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector, but it is not insurmountable. By implementing strategies such as building technical expertise, enhancing financial literacy, fostering networks and mentorship, challenging societal norms, and developing leadership and negotiation skills, women can not only overcome gender bias but also build the confidence needed to succeed. Empowering women in the agrifood sector is not only beneficial for the women themselves but also crucial for the economic development and food security of communities around the world. With the right strategies in place, women entrepreneurs can break through barriers, drive innovation, and contribute to the sustainable growth of the agrifood sector.

The UN Women and COLEAD series seeks to highlight and celebrate the inspiring stories of women entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector and its related industries and provide valuable insights into their business successes, the strategies they have employed to navigate challenges, and how they have triumphed over gender-related obstacles. Through these stories, the series offers an opportunity to learn from their experiences, share best practices, and understand the resilience and innovation that drive their achievements. Ultimately, it serves as a platform to amplify the voices of women in agriculture, inspire future entrepreneurs, and promote gender equality within the sector.

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### Agenda

**Moderation:** Gayle Gollop, Programme Specialist, Private Sector, UN Women MCO Caribbean

**14:00-14:10 Welcome remarks and launch of the series**

- Isiuwa Iyehen, Head of Office Caribbean, ad interim (a.i.), UN Women MCO Caribbean
- Jeremy Knops, General Delegate, COLEAD

**14:10-14:20 Introduction to the session:** Alexandra Carter, Programme Analyst, UN Women MCO Caribbean

**14:20-15:20 Panel on experiences from Women Entrepreneurs**

Panelists from the Caribbean and Africa will share how gender bias has impacted their entrepreneurial journeys, and how their leadership has empowered other women entrepreneurs and farmers.

- Christina Pooler, Owner, Zantarea Farms, Barbados
- Fannie Perisha Gondwe, Founder, Perisha Agro, Malawi
- Lana Athanaze, Founder, Éclat Nova Luxuries, Dominica
- Patricia Zoundi Yao, Founder, Canaan Land, Côte d'Ivoire

**15:20-15:50 Q&A:** Open discussion with panelists

**15:50-16:00 Way forward:** Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEAD

## Panelists Biodata

**Christina Pooler (Barbados)** – Owner of Zantarea Farms, Christina is a third-generation agriculturalist and sustainability advocate. Currently pursuing a Master's in Natural Resource and Environmental Management, she is a NOAA fellow researching soil quality improvement. She also mentors young farmers through IICA's Future Farmers Think Tank and AgriMentor Program.

**Fannie Perisha Gondwe (Malawi)** – Founder of Perisha Agro and Packaging Enterprise, Fannie combats malnutrition and empowers rural women through biofortified foods and sustainable agriculture. She provides training and resources to over 300 women farmers, ensuring gender inclusivity in agriculture. Her impact on food security and women's economic independence has been recognized with numerous awards, including the 2024 Women Agri-preneurs of the Year Award.

**Lana Athanaze (Dominica)** – Founder of Éclat Nova Luxuries, Lana brings 26 years of experience in banking and finance. Her brand specializes in sustainable, botanical skincare, blending traditional and modern methods. She is committed to community empowerment, collaborating with small-scale farmers, the Kalinago community, and differently-abled artisans.

**Patricia Zoundi Yao (Côte d'Ivoire)** – A social entrepreneur and founder of Canaan Land, Patricia empowers women through sustainable agriculture and financial inclusion. She also leads QuickCash and Digital Hub, improving financial services for rural populations. As president of the Small and Medium Enterprises Movement (MPME), she advocates for gender equality in male-dominated sectors like agriculture and finance. Her leadership has earned recognition from the African Forum of Women Leaders (FAFL) and UNCTAD.



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