

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



Session n°3: Power in Connection: Collaborating & Networking for Women's Business Growth

Wednesday 21 May 2025

HIGHLIGHTS

About the collaboration UN Women and COLEAD

The collaboration between [UN Women](#) and [COLEAD](#) focuses on empowering women entrepreneurs in the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries and beyond. The South-South Series is specifically designed for women entrepreneurs and business leaders, providing a platform for collaboration, knowledge sharing, skill enhancement, market access, and networking opportunities.

Session n°3: Power in Connection: Collaborating & Networking for Women's Business Growth

The third session of the South-South Series was focused on **Collaborating & Networking for Women's Business Growth**. The session held on the 21st of May 2025 was a success! The session attracted a great interest from all regions in the world: **560 registered from various continents** and accessed all information and recordings.

Moderated by Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEAD, and opened Jeremy Knops, General Delegate, COLEAD, the session featured five accomplished women leaders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They shared insights into their business networks supporting women entrepreneurs. The interactive Q&A session was moderated by Nina Desanlis-Perrin, Project Officer at COLEAD's Networks and Alliances team, fostering an engaging dialogue between participants and speakers. Alonso Bobes, Women's Economic Empowerment Associate at UN Women Caribbean, closed the session by outlining the next steps and opportunities for continued collaboration.

Meet our women entrepreneurs



**Nana Adjoa Sifa
Amponsah**
Founder, Guzakuza,
Ghana



Irasema Infante
Lead sector
specialist, Trade &
Integration,
ConnectAmericas for
Women, IDB



Prisca Soko
Chair, African
Women In Business,
South Africa



**Mrinalini
Venkatachalam**
Regional Director,
Southeast Asia, North
Asia and Oceania,
WEConnect
International



Natalia Buenahora
Private Sector
Consultant, Digital
& Entrepreneurship,,
UN Women Americas
& Caribbean



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Nana Adjoa Sifa Amponsah - Founder, [Guzakuza](#), Ghana

Nana Adjoa Sifa Amponsah is a Ghanaian social entrepreneur and advocate for women's economic empowerment in Africa, especially in agribusiness and agritech. She is the founder of [Guzakuza](#), a social enterprise launched in 2015 to support women through training, mentorship, and investment opportunities. Its key program, the *Ignite Agribusiness Fellowship*, has trained hundreds of young African women. She also leads initiatives like *SheFarms*, *Women in Agribusiness Week (WAW)*, and the *Africa Women in Agribusiness Awards*. Nana co-founded *Yo!Gate Foods* and was President of the *Direct Impact Foundation* (2012–2015). She has held advisory roles with organizations like UN Women and GIZ. Currently, she is a director at the *London Centre for Agribusiness* and serves on advisory boards such as *Regen10* and the *Transformational Investing in Food Systems* initiative. Her work significantly advances sustainable agriculture and women's leadership across Africa.

Nana shared powerful insights from her organization's ten-year journey empowering women in the agrifood sector across Africa. She highlighted the structural barriers women face which include limited access to land, capital, markets, and visibility, and explained how [Guzakuza](#) has tackled these through platforms like [Ignite](#), [She Farms](#), and [WiFAL Magazine](#), fostering leadership, collaboration, and storytelling among women entrepreneurs. Emphasizing the power of connection, Nana spoke about the Women in Agribusiness Meetup, which has led to cross-regional ventures such as joint packaging initiatives and a new community-driven credit pool created to bypass traditional financing barriers. She also discussed building trade bridges between African and European women through business events like [WiFAL UK](#) and a [forum](#), enabling women to trade, collaborate, and access global markets. Her closing message was a call for women to intentionally brand themselves, create their own networks where none exist, and shift from competition to collaboration as a pathway to enterprise growth and collective impact.

Irasema Infante - Lead sector specialist, Trade & Integration, [ConnectAmericas for Women](#), IDB

Irasema Infante is a Lead Sector Specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), with over 15 years of experience in regional development across Central America and Mesoamerica. At the IDB, she has led and supported initiatives in economic and social infrastructure, including the modernization of border crossings, regional electricity interconnection, institutional responses to migration, access to healthcare and livelihoods, and regulatory reform. She currently plays a key role in [ConnectAmericas for Women](#), an IDB initiative aimed at expanding opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Latin America and the Caribbean through enhanced market access and business support. Before joining the IDB, Irasema worked at the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Subsecretariats for Latin America and the Caribbean, and for North America. She also served as a research assistant at El Colegio de México. She holds a dual bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations with distinction from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), and a Master's degree in International Relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Irasema shared how [ConnectAmericas for Women](#) helps women-led businesses across Latin America and the Caribbean overcome barriers to trade, financing, and participation in value chains. Only 14% of SMEs in the region are led by women, so [ConnectAmericas](#) offers a free platform providing training, technical assistance, and networking tools. So far, over 200,000 women have engaged with the platform, with 80,000 women-led businesses registered. [ConnectAmericas](#) support led to 45% of women's participation in 50 business meetings organised between 2020 and 2024. Key tools include online courses on digitalization and supplier development, a business directory, procurement alerts, and the [Bid Americas](#) app powered by AI. Irasema emphasized how platforms like this one not only expand access to markets but also build confidence, helping women overcome self-doubt and scale their businesses. By showcasing the success of peers, women gain the confidence to take bold steps and realizing their full potential.

Prisca Soko - Chair, [African Women In Business](#), South Africa

Prisca Soko is a South African business leader and Certified Internal Auditor with over 24 years of experience in finance, auditing, and business development. She holds a Bachelor of Accounting Science (Honours) CTA from the University of South Africa and completed her articles with Deloitte South Africa. Her career spans roles such as Chief Financial Officer at Mpumalanga Parks Board and founder of businesses in the Oil & Gas, Electrical Engineering, and Manufacturing sectors in both South Africa and

Zimbabwe. Prisca has served on numerous audit committees and boards across public and private sectors. She is a long-time member and shareholder of Women in Oil and Energy of South Africa (WOESA) and has been Group Business Development Executive for WOESA since 2014. In 2019, she became Chairperson of SADC-WIB (Women In Business), focusing on building networks and investment portfolios in sectors like agriculture and energy across the SADC region. She also chairs the African Women In Business organization. Prisca has received multiple honors, including the Women in Energy Leadership Award (2017) and Technology Women in Business – Business Woman of the Year (2007) from the South African Department of Minerals and Energy.

Prisca explained how [African Women in Business](#) supports women entrepreneurs across diverse sectors including energy, trade, agriculture, and manufacturing. She outlined their three core training pillars—export readiness, digital skills, and financial literacy—developed to tackle systemic barriers women face in scaling up businesses. Through their export program, over 120 women in 12 countries were trained to meet international standards. Their ICT and financial literacy initiatives aim to formalize informal businesses and build confidence in navigating formal economies. A key part of their mission is enabling women to benefit from continental integration under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), helping them shift from informal, community-level trade to structured participation in national and cross-border markets. Prisca emphasized the need to support women in entering high-value, niche markets and announced new ventures in organic coffee and olive oil production, tapping into global demand while fostering inclusive growth under AfCFTA. Finally, she emphasized that building strong networks and strategic alliances, both with women-led and broader business organizations, is essential for expanding opportunities and influencing policies.

Mrinalini Venkatachalam - Regional Director, Southeast Asia, North Asia and Oceania, WEConnect International

As Regional Director for Southeast Asia and Oceania, Mrinalini (Minnie) provides support to WEConnect International by enhancing brand visibility and conducting outreach to women entrepreneurs and corporate buyers in Southeast Asia, East Asia and Oceania. Her region is probably the fastest growing for small and medium enterprises, including those that are women owned. There is a large diversity in types of products, particularly in the sectors of finished consumer goods, commodities and professional services. This has the potential to create mass appeal, especially amongst large established FMCGs and retail chains. Consistency in quality also allows these businesses to remain sustainable, thus providing employment and allowing communities to thrive. With experience spanning over a decade, Minnie has worked to bridge the gap between unmet social needs and service providers, giving large corporations, government agencies, community organizations and social enterprises the platform to create measurable social impact. She speaks regularly at schools, community events, corporate gatherings and conferences about the role that gender equality plays in achieving a more sustainable world for everyone. Minnie has been awarded the Singapore Women's Weekly's Great Women of Our Time Award in the Public Service and Education category and has been nominated as one of Cleo Singapore's 2016 top ten Changemakers.

Minnie highlighted that [WeConnect International](#) tackles the systemic exclusion of women-owned businesses from global supply chains by connecting over 20,000 women entrepreneurs with 180 corporate buyers across 135 countries. They ensure businesses are genuinely women-owned through certification, preventing tokenism. Beyond access, WeConnect builds capacity by helping women sharpen their pitch, improve procurement readiness, and navigate complex contracts. Networking and collaboration are central to their approach. By linking women entrepreneurs, corporations, and governments, WeConnect creates a powerful ecosystem that spans continents, enabling women to break into traditionally male-dominated sectors. For example, their global financial boot camp in partnership with Moody's united women entrepreneurs worldwide, fostering cross-industry partnerships that have led to joint bids and shared success. Minnie's insights underscore how strategic networking and collaboration within such a global ecosystem empower women-owned businesses to break barriers, scale successfully, and drive economic growth that benefits communities worldwide.

Natalia Buenahora - Private Sector Consultant, Digital & Entrepreneurship, [UN Women Americas & Caribbean](#)

Natalia Buenahora works at the UN Women Office for Latin America and the Caribbean as part of the Partnerships team, specializing in women's entrepreneurship, the digital divide, and the private sector. She is responsible for leading the [www.TodasConectadas.org](#) initiative, a collaborative platform led by UN Women, Microsoft, Mastercard, and Eidos Global, aiming to empower over 3.8 million women in Latin America and the Caribbean by providing free online courses, digital tools, and economic opportunities to enhance their digital skills, entrepreneurship, and participation in the digital economy. A lawyer by profession, she has served as a Human Rights Specialist at the OAS IACHR. She is an entrepreneur, mother, and overall caregiver.

Natalia emphasized that [Todas Conectadas](#) provides a digital platform that connects over 35,000 women across Latin America and the Caribbean. This initiative goes beyond just offering training, it centralizes resources and fosters peer-to-peer learning, recognizing that hearing other women's experiences is often as powerful as formal courses. The platform adapts content to different entrepreneurial stages, helping women efficiently build their skills, from digital marketing to financial literacy, while also facilitating connections with mentors worldwide through the MicroMentor program. Natalia highlighted that connection is not just networking, it is access to opportunities, faster learning, and sustainable growth, which is especially critical given women's disproportionate unpaid care burdens. *Todas Conectadas* champions business reconversion using technology and encourages cooperative models among women-led businesses to meet the demands of large corporations. By creating this ecosystem of support, the initiative empowers women to overcome isolation and scale their businesses regionally and beyond.

Key highlights

In today's dynamic global economy, women entrepreneurs are key drivers of innovation, job creation, and inclusive development. Yet, they continue to face systemic barriers such as limited access to capital, markets, and decision-making spaces. This session explored how collaboration and networking serve as powerful strategies for overcoming these challenges. By building business networks, formal and informal, women can access vital resources, mentorship, partnerships, and new markets. Collaboration acts as a force multiplier, enabling women to scale through joint ventures, cooperatives, and cross-sector partnerships. Digital platforms further expand these opportunities, breaking geographic barriers and facilitating global knowledge exchange. For these connections to thrive, supportive ecosystems, inclusive policies, and gender-sensitive approaches are essential. Ultimately, investing in women's collaborative networks is not just a growth strategy, it is fundamental to achieving equitable and sustainable economic transformation.

The discussions deepened this understanding by highlighting that overcoming women entrepreneurs' challenges requires more than access alone. Tailored, adaptive support, especially that acknowledges women's limited time and diverse needs, is critical. Ecosystems combining certification, capacity-building, peer learning, and mentorship across borders can drive real impact. Collaboration fosters resilience by enabling women to share best practices, pool resources, and co-bid on contracts, turning individual limitations into collective strength. Digital platforms are vital in closing information gaps and delivering personalized, stage-specific training while connecting women to mentors worldwide. Additionally, cooperative models and business reconversion through technology emerged as promising strategies to boost market participation, particularly when backed by inclusive policies and robust impact measurement. The session affirmed that sustainable progress depends on nurturing interconnected networks where women grow together, unlocking broader economic and social benefits.

Recording of the session: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FDSOefL954>

Women Business Networks

- Africa

African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF): <https://www.aatf-africa.org/>
African Women Entrepreneurs Cooperative (AWEC): <https://www.weareawec.org/>
African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD): <https://awardfellowships.org/>
African Women in Business: <https://africanwib.com/>
Association of Women Agripreneurs (AFA): <https://femaleagripreneurs.com/>
AWAN Afrika (African Women Agribusiness Network): <https://awanafrica.org/>
Guzakuza: <https://guzakuza.com/>
Pan-African Rural Women's Assembly (PARWA): <https://www.ruralwomensassembly.org/>
Women of Africa Network: <https://womenofafricanetwork.org/>

- Pacific

Pacific Women's Professional & Business Network (PWPBN): <https://pacificwomenpbn.com/>
Women in Business Development Inc. (WIBDI): <https://www.womeninbusiness.ws/>

- Latin America and Caribbean

ConnectAmericas for Women: <https://connectamericas.com/es/mujeres>
ProMujer: <https://promujer.org/portal/>
Red Impacto LATAM: <https://redimpacto.org/>
Red Mujer y Empresa: <https://redmujeryempresaoit.org/index.php>
Todas Conectadas: <https://todasconectadas.org/>

- Global

WEConnect International: <https://weconnectinternational.org/>

Resources

- Publications

Neumeyer, X., Santos, S.C., Caetano, A. *et al.* Entrepreneurship ecosystems and women entrepreneurs: a social capital and network approach. *Small Bus Econ* 53, 475–489 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-018-9996-5>

OECD (2017). "Enhancing the Contributions of SMEs in a Global and Digitalised Economy". <https://www.oecd.org/mcm/documents/C-MIN-2017-8-EN.pdf>

UN Women Caribbean. 2023. Building collaboration and community for women's business success. https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/10/building-collaboration-and-community-for-womens-business-success?utm_source=chatgpt.com

UN Women Australia (2025). Leadership Network launches today to address gender gaps. <https://unwomen.org.au/un-women-australia-leadership-network-launches-today-to-address-gender-gaps/>

UN Women Europe and Central Asia (2025). For All Women and Girls: Emel Gültekin on the Power of Partnership and Solidarity. <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/03/for-all-women-and-girls-emel-gultekin-on-the-power-of-partnership-and-solidarity>

UN Women Jamaica (2025). Afro-Descendant women entrepreneurs benefit from Business development bootcamp in Jamaica. <https://jamaica.un.org/en/220485-afro-descendant-women-entrepreneurs-benefit-business-development-bootcamp-jamaica>

VoxDev. 2023. Expanding professional networks catalyses female entrepreneurship. <https://voxdev.org/topic/firms/expanding-professional-networks-catalyses-female-entrepreneurship>

World Bank (2022). "Women, Business and the Law". <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/b187725b-29ff-5c61-91e7-5110ab3c4a71>.

- Webinars

Innovation Women Speak!: <https://innovationwomen.com/webinars/?utm>

Cherie Blair Foundation – Business Bootcamp Webinars: <https://cherieblairfoundation.org/how-can-we-support-you/business-bootcamp/?utm>

Women's Enterprise Development Center: <https://wedcbiz.org/entrepreneur/webinars/>

UN Women-COLEAD South- South Series: Empowering and Growing Women-led Business. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLV5hWpGiR940wWlfhb-X6vg_fyzwS7zky

- Trainings

COLEAD training materials: <https://training.colead.link/>

UN Women training materials: <https://portal.trainingcentre.unwomen.org/unw-catalog-mobile/>

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[UN Women Caribbean](#): Gayle Gollop – National Private Sector Specialist, Alonso Bobes – Women's Economic Empowerment Associate

[COLEAD](#): Isolina Boto – Head of Networks and Alliances, Nina Desanlis-Perrin – Project Officer, Ahoefa Soklou – Project Officer



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