



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



UN Women – COLEAD 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 – 14:00-16:00 UTC

[Online \(Zoom\)](#)

Live interpretation in English, French and Spanish

Women entrepreneurs across the Global South play a vital role in driving innovation, creating jobs, and fostering inclusive economic growth. Despite their growing numbers and influence, many women-led businesses continue to face systemic challenges—including limited access to finance, markets, mentorship, and strategic networks—that inhibit their full potential.

Recognizing these barriers, UN Women and COLEAD have partnered to launch the South-South Series: Empowering and Growing Women-Led Businesses. 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.

This series brings together changemakers, entrepreneurs, experts, and policymakers to explore practical strategies for advancing women's economic empowerment in agribusiness and beyond.

Context

In a rapidly evolving global economy, the role of women entrepreneurs has become increasingly prominent. Women-led businesses are not only driving job creation and innovation but also contributing to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development and social transformation. Despite this momentum, women continue to face systemic barriers—limited access to capital, constrained market opportunities, and underrepresentation in decision-making platforms.

In this context, collaboration and networking emerge as powerful strategies to overcome such challenges and accelerate the growth of women's enterprises. The power in connection lies in the ability of women to learn from each other, pool resources, build influence, and unlock new markets—together.

The value of networks in business growth

Networks function as ecosystems of opportunity. They offer women entrepreneurs access to information, mentorship, partnerships, and funding pathways that are often out of reach when navigating the business landscape alone. Whether formal—like chambers of commerce or women's business associations—or informal—like peer circles and online communities—networks help break the isolation that many women entrepreneurs experience, particularly in rural areas or male-dominated industries.



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For instance, research¹ shows that businesses with access to mentoring networks have higher survival rates and revenues, improved business performance, innovation, and market access, especially for women-led SMEs. Access to business networks and associations positively affects growth, formalization, and revenue of women-owned firms.

When women connect, they are able to share best practices, avoid common pitfalls, and stay informed about industry trends and innovations. These relationships are especially critical in traditionally underserved sectors like agriculture, where market volatility, climate stress, and gender-based exclusion are common.

Collaboration as a force multiplier

Collaboration between women-owned enterprises can lead to collective bargaining power, cost-sharing, and greater visibility. Through cooperatives, joint ventures, and shared service models, women entrepreneurs can scale their operations, pool investments in technology, and negotiate better terms with buyers or suppliers.

In agribusiness, for example, women-led cooperatives have enabled smallholder farmers to access new export markets and adopt modern production practices. By collaborating, they can meet quality and volume demands that would be unattainable individually. Similarly, cross-sector partnerships—with fintech firms, digital platforms, or energy providers—can allow women-led businesses to innovate faster and build climate-resilient solutions.

Moreover, collaboration across borders enhances South-South cooperation and knowledge exchange, allowing women from different regions to co-create solutions and advocate for gender-responsive policies in trade and enterprise development.

Digital platforms and inclusive innovation

The digital era presents new frontiers for women's networking and collaboration. Online marketplaces, social media groups, and virtual incubators allow women entrepreneurs to expand their reach, find collaborators, and access global knowledge without physical or geographic barriers. Initiatives like virtual trade expos, peer-learning platforms, and business matchmaking services are leveling the playing field and democratizing access to growth opportunities.

However, to fully harness these platforms, women need supportive digital infrastructure, affordable internet access, and digital literacy skills. Without inclusion in the digital economy, the potential of technology to empower women remains unrealized.

Enabling ecosystems and policy support

For collaboration and networking to flourish, women need enabling environments. Governments, development partners, and private sector actors must invest in platforms that bring women entrepreneurs together and provide incentives for cooperative business models. Policies that recognize the value of

¹ 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>

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

women's networks—through procurement opportunities, business incubation, and grants for collaborative projects—can help mainstream these strategies.

Furthermore, business support organizations must adopt gender-sensitive approaches, recognizing the unique constraints women face, such as caregiving responsibilities, mobility issues, or cultural restrictions, and designing networking opportunities that are inclusive and accessible.

Way forward

Collaboration and networking are not just tools for growth—they are lifelines that can transform the trajectory of women-led businesses. By leveraging the power in connection, women can overcome structural barriers, co-create solutions, and build thriving, resilient enterprises. As we look to a more equitable economic future, investing in women's business networks and collaborative ecosystems is not only smart policy—it is essential for sustainable development.

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Agenda

Moderation: *Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEAD*

14:00-14:10 Introduction to the session

14:10-14:15 Welcoming remarks: *Jeremy Knops, General Delegate, COLEAD*

14:15-15:20 Panel on experiences from women entrepreneurs in business networks

This panel will explore how women entrepreneurs can benefit from networks and digital platforms for business growth and highlight successful collaboration models that support women's access to finance, markets, knowledge, and policy influence.

- *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, South East Asia, North Asia and Oceania, WEConnect International*
- *Natalia Buenahora, Private Sector, Digital & Entrepreneurship Regional Alliance, UN Women Americas and the Caribbean*

15:20-15:50 Q&A: *Nina Desanlis-Perrin, Project Officer, Networks and Alliances, COLEAD*

15:50-16:00 Way forward: *Alonso Bobes, Women's Economic Empowerment Associate, UN Women Caribbean*

Panelists Biodata

Nana Adjoa Sifa Amponsah

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.

Irasema Infante

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.

Prisca Soko

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.

Mrinalini Venkatachalam

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.

Natalia Buenahora

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.



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