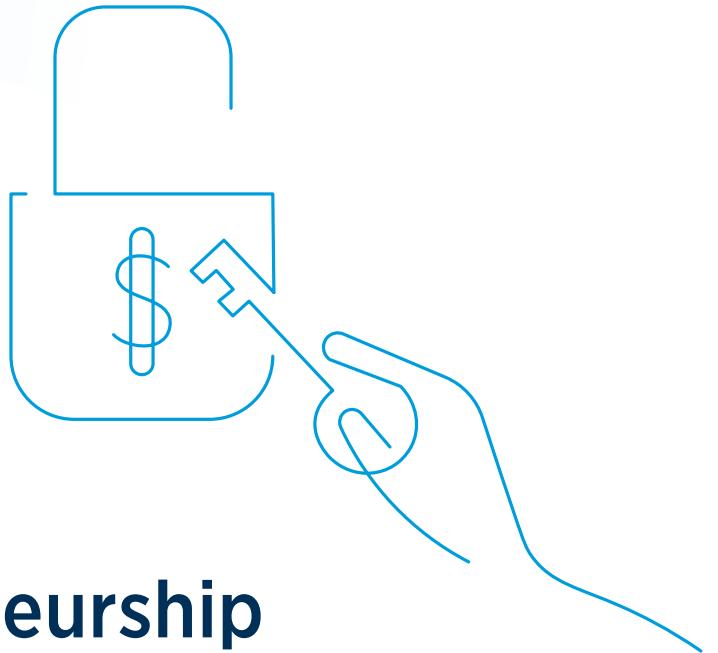


PRACTICAL TIPS

FOR BUSINESS ACCELERATORS TO SUPPORT
WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

**Lessons from the ‘Resilience for
Women-led SMEs’ programme in Myanmar**



Women entrepreneurship

is a vital key for advancing women's economic empowerment and has proven to have multiplier effects on decent employment and economic growth.¹ Although women-led businesses make up 50 per cent of microenterprises and 59 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in East Asia and the Pacific², only 13 per cent of business accelerator participants were women-led.³

As a consequence, accelerators are missing out on a large potential customer segment, and women entrepreneurs are less likely to access and benefit from the resources, network and investment support that business accelerators provide. This perpetuates the gap between women-owned and men-owned enterprises in terms of size, profitability and resilience against adverse economic shocks.⁴

Unlike men, women commonly face barriers such as social and cultural norms, gender stereotypes and unequal access to resources which undermine their potential as entrepreneurs.⁵ However, traditional business acceleration programmes often do not consider the unique challenges and constraints – and opportunities – that women-led businesses face. Thus, helping accelerators to be more gender-smart presents an opportunity to make significant gains toward developing a gender-equitable entrepreneurship landscape.⁶

This short brief is a summary of the insights gained from adapting a traditional acceleration programme to the needs of women-led businesses in Myanmar. The programme was implemented virtually due to constraints arising from the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the political turmoil in the country. Our findings are true for women-focused programmes but are also applicable to any business capacity-building programme that incorporates a purposeful gender lens across all levels of their framework.

1 UNESCAP (2017) Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN.

2 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2018) 2018/2019 Women's Entrepreneurship Report.

3 GALI (2022) Accelerating Women-led Start-ups.

4 The ASEAN Post (2019) Are ASEAN Businesswomen Being Ignored?

5 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2018) 2018/2019 Women's Entrepreneurship Report.

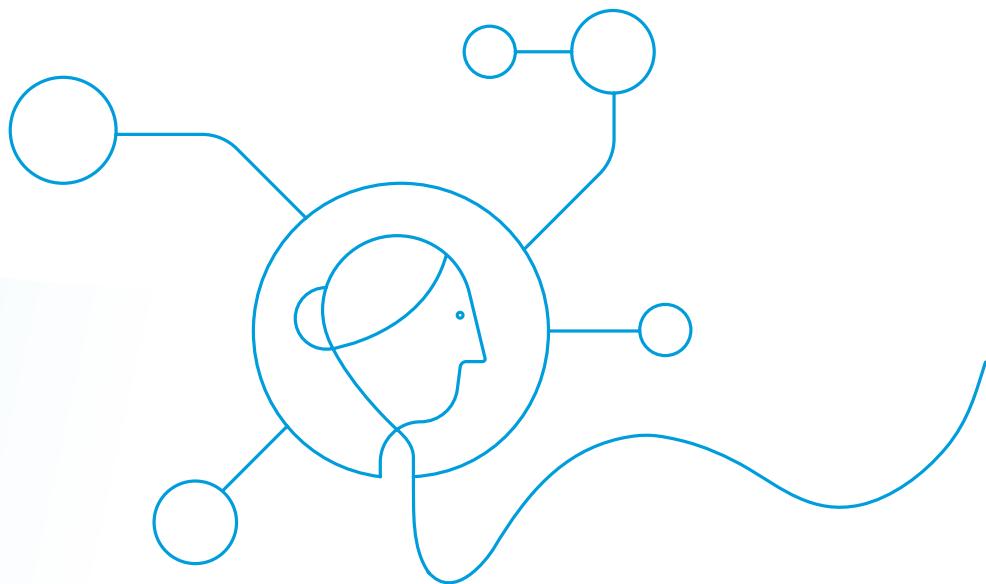
6 INCAE (2020) Accelerators as Drivers of Gender Equality.

Case Study:

Accelerating COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery in Myanmar through Resilient and Gender Transformative Enterprises

The 'Accelerating COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery in Myanmar through Resilient and Gender Transformative Enterprises' programme was a joint effort between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, and UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). It aimed to support the socio-economic recovery from the double crisis in Myanmar through building the economic resilience of women-owned/led enterprises and inculcating gender-smart initiatives in the Myanmar innovation ecosystem.

The programme ran from October 2020 to April 2022, using a systems-based approach in partnership with accelerator programmes, banks, and other stakeholders to promote the recovery, resilience, and sustainability of women entrepreneurs. The flagship of the programme was an online resilience-focused acceleration programme implemented by Impact Hub Yangon (IHY) with Bopinc to ensure the incorporation of a gender lens on all levels of the programme.



10 practical tips for a more gender-smart business accelerator

1

Set your team up for success.



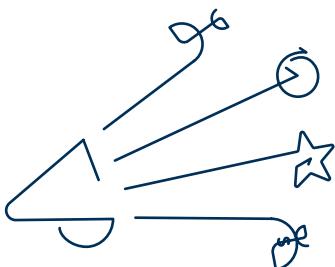
It has been established that fewer women apply to and join accelerator programmes; those who did participate often did not gain as much benefit as the men.⁷ This may be because women are often absent during the design of such programmes and thus, have little inputs to align the framework to their needs.⁸ Therefore, you need to first examine if all genders are represented in the management team, the selection committee, the trainers, mentors, and investor networks when setting up an accelerator programme. Diversity within your organisation helps you to better serve the needs of a more diverse range of entrepreneurs. Do consider conducting training on the needs and benefits of diversity and gender balance in the staffing to ensure that the whole team is on board.

In practice

We encouraged our male-dominated accelerator partner to consider gender dynamics when setting up the ‘Resilience for Women-led SMEs’ programme. The discussions resulted in them hiring a woman as the project manager and her inputs were invaluable in helping the women mentors and jury members to better understand, identify with, and connect with the experiences of the programme participants.

2

Find the right message and channels.



Recruiting entrepreneurs who fit your programme is essential for every accelerator. You can add a gender lens to your recruitment process by analysing the needs and behaviours of the entrepreneurs you wish to attract.

Below are a few ideas to help you customise your message:

- i. Create a fictional woman entrepreneur you want to attract and consider the barriers she may face in applying to your programme;
- ii. Adjust the language and messaging you use to communicate with this woman entrepreneur. Your main message should be inspiring, emotionally engaging and easy to understand;
- iii. Analyse the channels and intermediaries women entrepreneurs utilize regularly (e.g. Facebook groups or offline platforms for women);
- iv. Reach out to women-focused intermediaries (e.g. women’s associations);
- v. Ask women from your networks for referrals and to share your materials with their networks.

In practice

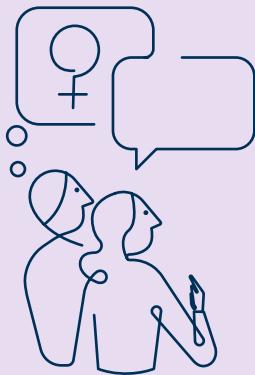
We mapped out the organizations supporting women entrepreneurs in Myanmar and requested these organizations to help circulate the programme information within their networks. Following that, we co-hosted an interactive information session about the accelerator programme on Zoom and Facebook live stream which reached 170 potential applicants and women-led enterprise. We used wording and language that the women-led SMEs can relate to using the Burmese language. The outreach activities resulted in 210 applications to the programme in just two weeks.

7 GIZ (2022) Accelerating Women Entrepreneurs.

8 GALI (2022) Accelerating Women-led Start-ups.

3

Revamp your criteria.



Are your selection criteria currently giving men and women entrepreneurs equal opportunities to enter your programme? Does your selection committee reflect the type of entrepreneurs you are looking for? Think about the potential barriers preventing women entrepreneurs from participating in your programme; women often have little flexibility with their time, are less likely to own formal businesses, and have less access to finance, collateral or technology. They are less likely to be full-time business founders due to social gender inequality and unpaid care activities. Are your criteria non-negotiable or ‘nice-to-haves’? Research showed that men will apply for a job when they meet only 60 per cent of the qualifications, but women will apply only if they meet 100 per cent of them. If your criteria are too stringent, it may discourage women from applying to your programme.

In practice

We suggested making the selection committee as diverse as possible in terms of gender and background to ensure a fair selection. In addition to ownership and management teams' gender diversity, we also assessed the business in terms of its gender-transformative characteristics; e.g. how the businesses work with women as customers and as suppliers of goods in their value chains.

4

Identify the core needs and adapt.



The social and cultural environment affects men and women entrepreneurs in different ways. Women often face bigger pressure in the form of disproportional caregiving and household responsibilities and other gender norms imposed through society.

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My parents-in-law were not happy about my commitment to the business and for not being a stay-at-home mom to take care of the family 24/7. I was told that I am not a good daughter-in-law, wife, or mother for that, and it used to make me feel guilty. However, looking back now I do not regret it at all. I am very thankful that I did not trade my dreams and passions with being a good woman who meets the traditional standards."

- Programme Participant

While lowering and adjusting these barriers takes time, it is vital to address them in your programme to not only attract but retain women-led businesses.

In practice

We performed a needs assessment on the training needs and psychological, social and cultural factors affecting women in business (e.g. decision-making, household dynamics). We found that the women preferred a strong focus on peer learning and support (i.e. building friendships and business opportunities), room for active discussions and knowledge sharing, and training on leadership and conflict management skills. The results of the needs assessment led to several adjustments to the entire training and coaching programme.

5

Soft skills are essential.



In practice

The programme included a training module on ‘Leadership, Risk and Conflict Management’ per the areas identified in the needs assessment. Finding creative methods for interactive hands-on learning activities in a virtual environment proved challenging, but the impact was significant on the programme’s success.

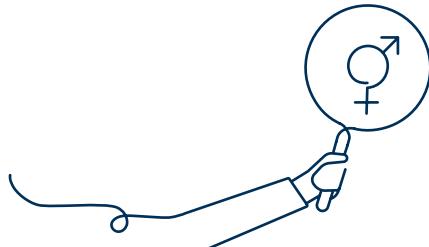
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I now realise that I have been handling conflict and interpersonal issues in an unhealthy way. This training has been eye-opening.”

- Programme Participant

6

Make gender practical and crosscutting.

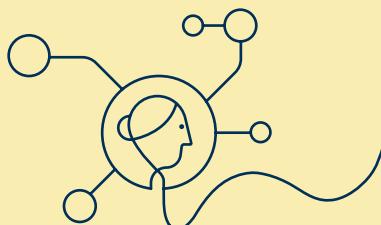


In practice

We dissected every aspect of the acceleration programme in terms of how it was managed (i.e. gender-responsive marketing for the outreach, selection criteria, selection committee, capacity building and mentorship, demo day) as well as content for addressing unique challenges and opportunities that women experience (i.e. gender-smart business models, value chains, marketing and communication, leadership, access to finance, negotiation and assertive communication, etc.).

7

Plan according to her schedule.



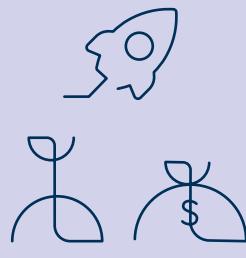
In practice

In Myanmar, we learned that the women preferred to meet during the weekends or after working hours to account for care responsibilities and work schedules. The women also requested for the modules to be flexible and to be provided with the recordings and slides in case they missed a session. Working online also offered an advantage by mitigating security risks for the participants.

⁹ World Bank (2020): Adapting Skill Training to Address Constraints to Women’s Participation.

8

Leverage the power of peer support.



In practice

The majority of participants recognized the importance of networking; however, they never or barely ever attended networking events due to its inconvenient timing (late at night when they are expected to be home and cater to their family) and they feared of getting a bad reputation for joining events attended by so many men late at night. The programme thus integrated two informal peer networking sessions and seven expert networking sessions based on the women's availability and interest.

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One of the main reasons I joined this capacity-building programme is to build connections with other women businesses and to access a peer support system that I feel like I belong to. Therefore, an accelerator programme that offers its participants to build support system amongst them is very important to me when deciding whether to join or not."

- Programme Participant

9

Prepare to go the extra mile.



In practice

Your accelerator programme must meet the entrepreneurs where they are at. This could mean spending more time on a certain theme when you notice the entrepreneurs struggling to apply it or providing additional mentorship and access to resources. Going the extra mile also includes acknowledging that women-led businesses may have different financial needs and that traditional fund-raising mechanisms (e.g. the classic venture capitalist financing) may not be the best way for them to access capital.

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My male competitors tend to be more successful at obtaining capital and other non-financial resources. As a woman, I have to work and prove myself harder to be deemed 'investment-worthy' for both formal and informal investors."

- Programme Participant

10

Create partnerships.



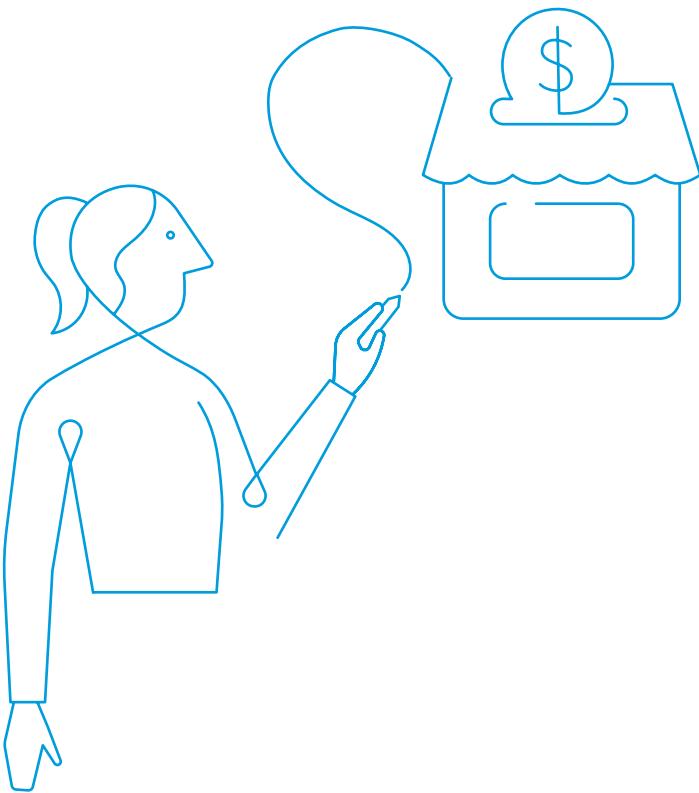
To create a long-lasting impact, it is not sufficient to work with only women entrepreneurs in isolation. Ecosystem stakeholders such as local governments, banks and investors will give you unique insights and help you to create meaningful connections that will last beyond the programme duration. Ideally, you can include those stakeholders throughout the programme by connecting the women to major decision-makers and funders in the ecosystem while building their entrepreneurial muscle at the same time.

In practice

As part of the Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) programme, we facilitated the connection between the women entrepreneurs and several financial institutions as well as executives from donor organizations. We also conducted gender lens training for SME loan officers in Myanmar banks. We found that the majority of loan officers did not track any gender-related data and held many harmful stereotypes about women-led businesses, resulting in women entrepreneurs getting less favourable treatment and lower chances of successful loan applications. Building the capacity of the SME loan officers helped raise awareness and started the conversation to reduce these systemic barriers.

Conclusion

To empower and uplift women-led businesses, we must move away from traditional accelerator programmes with one-size-fits-all content and curriculum. Accelerators need to understand the unique challenges and constraints women face and address them. They also need to customise their programmatic set-up, diversify the team and mentorship base, and systematically integrate a gender lens into all programme activities. The ‘Resilience for Women-led SMEs’ programme served as a pilot and showcased what a truly gender-smart accelerator programme can look like. We ideated and tested several activities and interventions to develop our top 10 tips for accelerators to become more gender-smart. We hope that sharing our learnings will demystify the process of making a programme more gender-smart and encourage other players to follow suit. Gender-responsive programme development and implementation can help everyone in designing accelerator activities that cater to the needs of all entrepreneurs while accounting for every participants' unique capabilities and strengths.



Partners

Bopinc

Bopinc is a non-profit foundation based in The Netherlands. It was founded in 2010 to utilize the power of entrepreneurship to fulfil aspirations and needs to improve the quality of life in low-income communities. Through the power of entrepreneurship and the right innovation, every new idea is turned upside down and inside out to find the right solution for low-income communities. From NGOs to SMEs to multinationals, Bopinc's diverse team of global innovators and entrepreneurs help organizations to design and deliver commercially and socially viable business models. Bopinc believes that bridging the gap between the private and development sectors will boost the economic productivity and growth in emerging economies, and unleash women's potential as entrepreneurs working in, and being consumers of, beneficial products and services.



About the authors

Lotte-Marie Brouwer, Women's Entrepreneurship Lead, Bopinc

Lotte-Marie's mission is to let women entrepreneurs thrive by making gender inclusion practical for everyone in the entrepreneurship ecosystem. Whether a woman micro-entrepreneur is selling sanitary pads door-to-door in rural Bangladesh or a woman is leading a high-growth agro-processing company in Kenya, she believes women entrepreneurs have the power to ignite positive change on a family, community, and national level. Besides leading the Women's Entrepreneurship work within Bopinc, she is currently conducting her PhD research on agri-businesswomen in Kenya at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

Doris Clemenz, Project Manager, Bopinc

Doris believes in the power of education and entrepreneurship to solve some of the world's most challenging problems. She has dedicated herself to designing and implementing capacity-building programmes that foster a growth mindset and entrepreneurial muscle for youth and start-up founders. Her main focus is on women's entrepreneurship and ensuring that these programmes are accessible and inclusive for all. Doris serves as a Project Manager at Bopinc and Global Projects Lead at Seedstars, where she designs and launches innovation projects in Asia and Africa.

UN Women

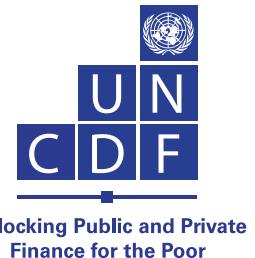
UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. UN Women supports the UN Member States to set global standards for achieving gender equality and work with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action.



Partners

UNCDF

The UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) leads in innovative transformational financing for public and private finance work for the poor in the world's 46 least developed countries. UNCDF offers "last mile" finance models that unlock public and private resources, especially at the domestic level, to reduce poverty and support local economic development. UNCDF's financing models work through two channels: financial inclusion which expands the opportunities for individuals, households, and small businesses to participate in the local economy, providing them with the tools they need to climb out of poverty and manage their financial lives; and by showing how localized investments — through fiscal decentralization, innovative municipal finance, and structured project finance — can drive public and private funding that underpins local economic expansion and sustainable development.



WeRise is a UN Women developed set of capacity-building tools and resources designed to support gender-inclusive entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific. WeRise is targeted to 'missing middle' small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially those owned and/or led by women, as well as entrepreneurship support organizations

WeRise is a growing toolbox with two initial flagship publications:



► [Read the publication](#)



► [Read the publication](#)

WeRise Toolkit for Entrepreneurs:

With actionable steps that all SMEs can take to make their businesses more gender inclusive, this toolkit also has a specific focus on supporting women-owned SMEs to understand and access the right type of finance. The toolkit currently includes two [finance maps](#) for Thailand and Indonesia.

WeRise Toolkit for Accelerators:

Created to help accelerators and other entrepreneurship support organizations to run gender-smart programming from design and outreach to delivery and networking building.

To learn more about how WeRise can support your enterprise or accelerator, or to inquire about trainings and workshops, contact weempower.asia@unwomen.org.

Disclaimer

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