

UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY NETWORK ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

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United Nations Development Fund for Women

WOMEN INTO THE NEW NETWORK FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL REINFORCEMENT (WINNER II)

Background

In a world economy undergoing major transformations as a result of the technological revolution, having the capacity to take advantage of the opportunities generated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is particularly critical in order for businesses to remain competitive. Women must be positioned to take advantage of these opportunities given the explosive growth in women's entrepreneurship around the world in the past twenty years. It is estimated that between one quarter and one third of the world's businesses are owned and operated by women.¹

However, despite the growing number of women entrepreneurs world-wide, women in developing countries – particularly small business owners – continue to face countless difficulties when creating, consolidating and expanding their businesses. One such challenge is limited access to ICTs in developing regions. While North America and Europe accounted for almost 80 percent of Internet users in 1999, Africa, with 13 percent of the world's population, had less than 1 percent of total Internet users worldwide.² The gendered nature of the digital divide is also evident. For instance, in the developing countries of China and South Africa, women users comprise a mere 7% and 17% of users respectively. Other practical obstacles to using the Internet cited by women include the cost of equipment and connectivity, as well as the lack of training, particularly for women in the Arab States, Africa and Latin America.³

Recognizing the importance of ICTs for business development and their potential to empower women, DEVNET/TIPS and UNIFEM came together to

build the capacity of women entrepreneurs in this area. More specifically, the first phase of the WINNER project successfully supported women entrepreneurs from five countries: Albania, Ecuador, Philippines, Nepal, and Romania in becoming proficient in using networking technologies and e-commerce tools for their business. The women participants learned how to use the Internet, email, chat rooms, and IT documents by combining a user-friendly CD ROM, a long distance learning system and customised training in local languages to expand their business opportunities.

WINNER II expanded outreach to include women from China, Bangladesh and Zimbabwe. The second phase of the project focused on providing training to participants in the application of ICT instruments to promote better business operation and access to local, regional and international markets. Participants receive training in e-commerce, international trade and entrepreneurial management and are provided an opportunity to gain a global presence through showcasing their products on an Electronic Market Space (EMS), thus gaining access to a global market of SMEs.

Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries are women entrepreneurs with micro and small enterprises, and intermediary women's organizations in developing countries that support women entrepreneurs.

Development Objective

WINNER II intends to build women's capacity in the area of information and communication technologies and business management in the small and microenterprise sector – particularly in terms of e-commerce capabilities – with a view to improve their business operations and expand their opportunities in the context of globalisation. This objective falls in line

¹ Gina Zabudovsky (1998) *Women Business Owners in Mexico: An Emerging Economic Force*. Hersa Ediciones, Mexico

² United Nations (2000) *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics*. United Nations Publications, New York.

³ Ibid

with UNIFEM's Strategy and Business Plan 2000-2003, through aiming to strengthen women's economic capacity, rights and sustainable livelihoods as entrepreneurs, producers and home-based workers.

Immediate Objectives

- To develop the capacity of women entrepreneurs in e-commerce, entrepreneurial management and international trade through training courses and by setting up the WINNER Help Desks
- To enable women to use the internet to showcase their enterprises and to facilitate women's access to international markets with the goal of enhancing their business opportunities through the development of an Electronic Market Space – EMS
- To provide a forum for WINNER participants to interact with SME associates in developed countries and amongst themselves in order to become familiar with transacting business negotiations with a view towards closing business deals via the Women Business virtual Meetings – WBM
- To foster institutional understanding and learning between partner organizations by promoting quantitative and qualitative monitoring and evaluation throughout the life of the project.

Activities

WINNER II provides beneficiaries with training on e-commerce, international trade and entrepreneurial management. Concepts to be highlighted during the training courses include international trade tools available for SME managers, reinforcement of international trading experiences and review of business plans. At least one "Help Desk" will be established at an intermediary organization's premises in each participating country. WINNER Help Desks will be a readily accessible assistance tool for various needs, including providing extra hours for hands on exercises in e-commerce and other internet tools and supporting participants during and after the training period. In addition, Help Desks will contribute to building the capacity of local women's organizations. The use of the WINNER Help Desks will be made available to all participants, with the assistance of the beneficiary organisations and guidance of the TIPS/WINNER national offices.

WINNER II recently developed an Electronic Market Space (EMS), which showcases participant's enterprises in order to enhance access to international markets. Through the creation of an exclusive market space on the Internet, WINNER participants have a specific web page on which to promote, offer and sell

products and services. The EMS will be linked to Industrialised Countries' market spaces and promote an electronic niche for women entrepreneurs within the global marketplace of SMEs.

Results

Since 1999 over 2,000 women have received WINNER training and well over 500 women's Business Opportunity Pages (BOPs) have been created on WINNER's Electronic Market Space (EMS). Participants of the project report increased self-confidence in using basic e-commerce tools. Beneficiaries are using email and the Internet to access new information, enhance communication and networking, and in some cases, undertake business negotiations and conclude business deals. Women have reported new access to local, regional and international markets since receiving WINNER training. Together, women beneficiaries represent an informal, international network of small and micro enterprise entrepreneurs. An unexpected but positive result of the project has been that many women entrepreneurs have formed new partnerships with other producers to meet increased demand from growing businesses.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

While women project participants continue to face serious challenges in accessing and applying ICTs to their businesses due to in-country infrastructure limitations, cost, language and time constraints, WINNER has helped create inroads for women entrepreneurs and build their skills. Reaching women in rural areas continues to be a challenge, as does ensuring sustainability in countries with different infrastructure realities. Another issue was unmet expectations given the impressive demand the project generated in countries such as Ecuador and Romania. This is being addressed by increasing the number of trainees and/or beneficiary organizations and through expanding into three new countries.

Monitoring and Evaluation

There will be regular monitoring and evaluation of the training courses to ensure that participants acquire the capacity to participate in the EMS. The outcomes of the WBM will also be monitored in order to measure results of the business encounters and commercial deals concluded, with a view to evaluating the overall performance of activities. The entire project will be evaluated using quantitative and qualitative analysis to measure the efficiency of the system as well as to introduce necessary adjustments to improve future activities of the project.