ADVANCING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP (AWE) INDIA NETWORK MEETING

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

December 19, 2024, New Delhi

ADVANCING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP (AWE) INDIA NETWORK 3RD CONVENING

Date: December 19, 2024
Venue: Desire Hall, Le Meridien, New Delhi

The third convening of the Advancing Women Entrepreneurship (AWE) India Network marked a pivotal moment in its ongoing mission to cultivate a robust and supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs across India. Building upon the fruitful discussions and enthusiasm generated during the second meeting held in July 2024, this gathering sought to formalize the network and address the various thematic challenges that women entrepreneurs face. Participants engaged in meaningful dialogue to align stakeholders and strategize on the ambitious vision of empowering and supporting 5 million women entrepreneurs by the year 2030. The atmosphere was charged with a collaborative spirit, as attendees worked together to lay the groundwork for a future where women-led businesses can thrive and contribute significantly to the economy.

Welcome Remarks and Progress So Far

The session commenced with a warm welcome by Meenakshi Rathore, Vice President, ACCESS Development Services, who reflected on the network's progress since its inception. A comprehensive overview was provided of the milestones achieved, including virtual deliberations by thematic working groups focused on policy support, capacity building, and knowledge sharing.

It was informed that the network has made significant strides in addressing fundamental challenges faced by women entrepreneurs - developing strategic recommendations for market access, financial inclusion, and skills development through partnerships with various stakeholders.

Context Setting

The opening discussions set a strategic tone, with Vipin Sharma, CEO, ACCESS Development Services, emphasizing the need for deliberation on formalizing the network and creating a sustainable structure. Some key critical questions were posed about the network's future:

- Should it act as a catalyst for new enterprises or focus on scaling existing ones?
- How can the network measure its progress and impact effectively?
- What systemic challenges, such as data collation and resource pooling, need to be addressed?

The conversation also highlighted practical solutions, such as regional-level aggregation, leveraging market linkages, and creating visibility through newsletters and outreach campaigns. The importance of integrating women's products into corporate sourcing processes and exploring ecosystem-level engagements, including 'Shark Tank'-style events, to unlock opportunities for women entrepreneurs in emerging non-farm sectors was underscored.

Advancing the Structure and Plan of AWE India Network

The session, led by Prof. Smita Premchander, Founder-Member, Sampark Foundation, provided a detailed roadmap for the network's formalization. Drawing a metaphor of a caravan, Smita described the network's evolution as a collective journey enriched by the contributions of diverse stakeholders. List of attendees is provided in Annex 1.

Formalization and Registration

Smita proposed completing the network's registration by March 2025, emphasizing the importance of institutional validation for credibility and access to funding. A draft memorandum and bylaws will be shared by mid-January 2025 for feedback, with a finalized version ready by mid-February. Discussions also considered the merits of registering as a society or association, factoring in tax implications.

Governance and Membership

A governance framework featuring an 11-member board with defined roles and responsibilities was presented as a means to ensure diverse representation and effective decision-making. Membership categories included individual members (₹10,000 annually) and institutional members (₹20,000 annually), with corporates encouraged to join as higher-paying contributors.

The membership fee structure was designed to ensure financial sustainability while maintaining inclusivity.

Thematic Focus Areas and Cross-Cutting Issues

The sessions discussed and highlighted four core thematic areas:

- Access to Finance: Addressing credit barriers through innovative financial products.
- Enabling Market Linkages: Strengthening women entrepreneurs' access to supply chains.
- Capacity Building and Mentorship: Equipping women with the skills and confidence to lead.
- Supporting Business Development: Fostering innovation and scalability in women-led enterprises.

Cross-cutting themes such as gender-disaggregated data, philanthropy, and digital public infrastructure were also emphasized as critical enablers for the network's success.

The engagement during this session was insightful, with participants raising pertinent concerns and suggestions. One of the primary issues raised was the need to ensure the network's inclusivity and address the systemic barriers and gender norms that continue to hinder women's entrepreneurial progress. Participants emphasized the importance of grassroots representation and the necessity to support nano enterprises, which often face distinct challenges in accessing resources and markets.

The discussion also delved into the definition and scope of business development support for women entrepreneurs. Participants highlighted the importance of providing strategic guidance, planning assistance, and holistic mentorship to help women entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of establishing and scaling their ventures. There were suggestions to borrow best practices from other development partners and explore the creation of a separate chamber for women in business, with a specific focus on profit-oriented entrepreneurship.

Addressing the participants' concerns, it was acknowledged that there is a need to strike a balance between formalization and maintaining a grassroots-driven approach. The participants also inquired about the network's plans to harness philanthropic support and mobilize resources for capacity building, mentorship, and financial assistance programs.

Overall, the AWE India Network convening demonstrated a comprehensive and strategic approach to advancing Women's Entrepreneurship in India. The session was concluded with a commitment to align the network's structure with its long-term vision, ensuring adaptability and inclusivity.

THEMATIC FOCUS SESSIONS

1. Leveraging Opportunities for Advancing Women Entrepreneurship, through ONDC

Namrata Singh, Head of New Domains & Demand Generation, ONDC, emphasized the transformative role of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in empowering women entrepreneurs. She explored the challenges they face, such as limited market access and inadequate networking opportunities, and underlined the importance of leveraging India's high digital adoption rate, especially among the youth. The potential of existing DPIs, such as ONDC, to provide scalable and cost-effective solutions was also highlighted.

The discussion expanded to India's robust digital ecosystem, built on foundational infrastructures like Aadhaar, UPI, and e-KYC. These technologies, she noted, serve as a strong base for creating entrepreneurial networks and ecosystems without requiring extensive external intervention. The insights encouraged a shift from traditional support mechanisms to strategies that leverage digital infrastructure to foster success among women entrepreneurs.

A proposal was made to develop networks on top of DPI tech stacks, focusing on improving market linkages and reducing logistics costs. The concept of creating extensive digital registries of products and services, complete with catalogues and optimized logistics, was presented as a game-changing approach to support women-led enterprises.

The diversity of India's entrepreneurial ecosystem was another key focus. The importance of moving away from uniform solutions and designing strategies that respect India's linguistic, cultural, and traditional richness was emphasized. This approach would ensure tailored support that aligns with the unique needs of varied entrepreneurial contexts.

2. Women-Led Development: Locating Opportunities in the Non-farm Sector

Ramesh Arunachalam, Leading Development Sector Expert, shared a blueprint for facilitating 9.87 million women micro-entrepreneurs by unlocking opportunities in non-farm sectors. Key sectors identified included the green economy, the care economy, garment industry, e-waste management and value-added food processing.

The green economy offers opportunities in solar energy, electric bikes, and EV charging stations, challenging stereotypes about women's ability to pursue these non-traditional roles. The care economy, encompassing disability care, mental health, childcare, and tech-enabled solutions, leverages women's traditional strengths and presents opportunities for partnerships with corporates and governments. E-waste management was identified as a profitable sector where women can contribute to collection, refurbishment, repair, and sustainable practices.

A recurring theme was the need to challenge gender stereotypes and explore non-traditional entrepreneurial opportunities rather than focusing solely on conventional enterprises.

Access to finance remains a challenge due to gender-driven credit scoring. The session emphasized alternative credit assessment frameworks, personalized and financial solutions. Mentorship networks and role models were identified as critical for inspiring women to explore new entrepreneurial areas. Women's unpaid work and the need for traceability in handlooms and fisheries were also highlighted. The discussion touched on digital adoption, with UPI as the primary interface for entrepreneurs. However, rural adoption faces challenges due to static biometrics, with adaptive biometrics suggested to improve access.

The session provided actionable recommendations to address barriers and explore non-traditional entrepreneurial opportunities, offering a roadmap for supporting women entrepreneurs in the non-farm sector.

3. Bridging the Gender Gap: Enabling Finance for Women Entrepreneurs

The session, led by Pallavi Madhok, Vice President of Advisory Services at Women's World Banking, focused on addressing the gender gap in finance for women entrepreneurs. Despite women demonstrating better customer lifetime value, lending to them remains low due to operational and systemic challenges, particularly in the informal sector. Women's restricted digital footprints and home-based operations often hinder financial institutions' ability to reach and underwrite them effectively.

To address these issues, various solutions tested and implemented by Women's World Banking were presented. These included a digital campaign by Lendingkart to increase women's applications, a step-up loan pilot by Annapurna Finance, and a partnership with SIDBI offering affordable, collateral-free loans to women through cluster-level federations (CLFs). The SIDBI program was noted for benefits such as higher loan ticket sizes, faster processing times, and reduced interest rates.

The discussion elaborated on the role of CLFs as distribution channels for banks, given their deep engagement with women in communities. The application process involves basic data collection, complemented by multiple checks and balances. The importance of training CLFs to ensure accurate data entry and robust credit assessment was emphasized. Additionally, the significance of creating a digital footprint for women, especially those from SC/ST communities, was stressed to encourage higher loan adoption.

The discussion addressed challenges faced by marginalized urban women hesitant to take loans due to negative experiences with debt within their households. Women in urban areas were identified as having more mature businesses and higher credit scores, presenting unique opportunities for financial inclusion. Strategies for building digital footprints, such as UPI usage and digital bookkeeping platforms like MeraBill, were highlighted, with the latter showing a 24% adoption rate.

The session offered valuable insights into enabling financial inclusion for women entrepreneurs. It emphasized effectively leveraging community-based structures and digital platforms to serve this underserved market segment.

4. Introducing 'Udyami' - a Start-Up Pitch Challenge for Women Entrepreneurs

Sandeep Sarma from MahaMoney presented an innovative proposal for a startup pitch challenge designed to empower women entrepreneurs across India. The initiative aims to contribute to the Network's goal of fostering 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030.

At the heart of the Challenge is a digital-first platform that leverages widely accessible tools such as WhatsApp to streamline the application and selection process. The program is built on a multifaceted approach, including a WhatsApp chatbot designed to collect applicant data, problem statements, and video pitches. This digital-first strategy capitalizes on the increasing penetration of mobile and internet access among women in tier 2 and tier 3 cities, unlocking a significant reservoir of entrepreneurial potential in these regions.

To enhance the program's reach and effectiveness, a network of regional committees was proposed. These committees would include a diverse array of stakeholders, such as experienced women entrepreneurs, representatives from social impact organizations, members of the BFSI sector, and independent consultants. Participants gain access to mentorship, funding, and recognition, fostering an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The discussion following the presentation brought valuable insights. Participants stressed the importance of inclusive models that support grassroots women entrepreneurs, especially those with limited digital presence or formal banking access. Suggestions such as incorporating community-based financing models were well-received, aligning with the program's commitment to long-term growth for early-stage ventures.

The Challenge's thoughtful design and focus on addressing systemic barriers position it as a potentially transformative effort to support women entrepreneurs in India.

Concluding Remarks

The meeting concluded on an inspiring and forward-looking note, with reflections on the progress made and a shared commitment to the network's vision. Participants expressed strong support for the initiatives discussed throughout the day and emphasized the critical importance of fostering an inclusive and collaborative ecosystem for women entrepreneurs across India. To solicit participant feedback, a Mentimeter activity was undertaken at the end of the session. The results are presented in Annex 2.

The closing session also sparked meaningful discussions about the network's immediate next steps and long-term priorities. The session concluded with an optimistic outlook for the network's future, grounded in shared purpose and determination to empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030.
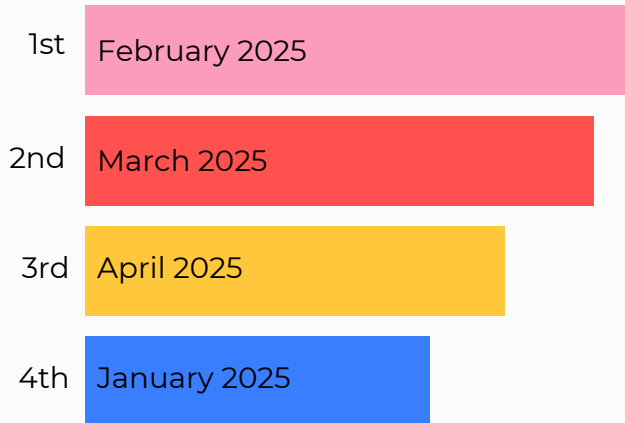
Annexure 1: List of Attendees

Sn	Organizations	Name
1	SRIJAN	Aditya Kumar
2	World Bank	Amit Arora
3	Digital Empowerment Foundation	Arpana Sharma
4	Udyogini	Ambar Afaq
5	SAATH	Chinmayi Desai
6	APMAS	CS Reddy
7	Cohesion Foundation Trust	Hiral Dave
8	SAATH	Kruti Jhaveri
9	Sattava	Lekhya Reddy
10	Hand In Hand	Madhu Sharan
11	KREA	Megha Shree
12	IMAGO	Moitreyee Nandi
13	Thompson & Shankar	Paridhi Yadav
14	Poulami Bhattacharyya	Poulami Bhattacharyya
15	Independent Expert	Prabhat Labh
16	IWWAGE	Radha Chellapa
17	Maha Money	Rahul Kanchan
18	La Caixa Foundation	Ranu Bhogal
19	Harsha Trust	Rashmi Adlekha
20	PCI India	Saurabh Shukla
21	SEWA	Sayra baloch
22	Independent Consultant	Shabana Parween
23	Development Alternatives	Shabhnam Durani
24	Kashiyana Foundation	Shivam Rastogi
25	SEWA	Sukanya Narain
26	Sambodhi	Swapnil
27	Yuva Gram Vikas Mandal	H.P. Deshmukh
28	Krushi Vikas	Amit Naphade
29	Hand In Hand	Ankit khare
30	Hand In Hand	Priyanka dal
31	Hand In Hand	Ravi Rajan
32	PIB Niti Aayog	S.Shera
33	Swan Livelihood	Meghna Joshi
34	Participant	Manish kumar
35	WWB	Rolina Rohtagi

Sn	Organizations	Name
36	CPT	Uttam Kumar
37	Brooke India	Anita Chauhan
38	Pararth Samiti	Manjiri Chande
39	Development Alternatives	Rashmika Das
40	Hand In Hand	Soumen Chatterjee
41	Ayekart	Anju Burk
42	Hand In Hand	Niharender
43	Hand In Hand	Bharat
44	ILO	Yashpal Sihag
45	Chaitanya	Kalpana Pant
46	SEWA	Shweta Arora
47	Hand In Hand	Raphal Madhiyan
48	Hand In Hand	P. Joseph
49	Hand In Hand	Prashant Pandey
50	Sampark foundation/ Expert	Smita Premchander
51	ONDC	Namrata Singh
52	Independent Expert	Ramesh Arunachalam
53	Women World banking	Pallavi Madhok
54	Maha Money	Sandeep Sharma
55	APMAS	Rama Lakshmi
56	CGAP	Anand Raman
57	Urmul	Medhavi Jangir
58	Urmul	Ramesh Saran
59	Independent Consultant	Girija srinivasan
60	FWWB	Neha Kansara

Annexure 2: Mentimeter Responses

The Network should next re-convene in?

1st **February 2025**

2nd **March 2025**

3rd **April 2025**

4th **January 2025**

Top Priority for the AWE-India Network

1st **Enabling Market Linkages**

2nd **Access to Finance and Resources**

3rd **Capacity Building and Mentorship**

4th **Supporting Business Development**

What should be the agenda for the next meeting?

Structure of all sub groups laid out and offerings clearly defined. Discussion on modus operandi of each sub group.	Short and long term plan development.	Delegation of responsibilities.
Operations of the network. The services the network will provide.	Achievements of the network so far success stories from each theme new products/ prototypes that have emerged tangible action points in the coming year.	Timelines clearly decided.
Analyse the gaps in access and repayment of loans.	Membership and benefits to be clearly articulated for efficient network.	How the board members of the network be selected? Elected/nominated?
Benefits of the entrepreneurs.	Board members election.	To explore the explore possibility of clustering the types of work/sector that women are involved in for smoother facilitation of cross learning and service rendering.