



H&M FOUNDATION

# Women Mean Business

A Global Report on Women's Entrepreneurship



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## Foreword

**My name is Sharmini Thiyakaran and I am 33 years old. I live in Konavil in the North of Sri Lanka. I own a manufacturing business, processing the husks of coconuts for fertiliser, mattress fibres and brushes. I employ sixteen women from our local community and our products are exported to places like China, South Africa and the UK.**

In Sri Lanka we have faced many challenges. The latest is, of course, the coronavirus pandemic. Before that it was the long civil war. My parents are farmers, so our income was unpredictable and sometimes we didn't have enough food or clothes. I was lucky though, because my parents did everything in their power to get me an education.

When I was struggling to find a job after graduating, my husband and I came up with the idea of using his land full of coconut trees. I received training in coir brush production and the Coconut Development Board supported me to purchase the initial machines. When I started the business there were many people who thought I was mad! They didn't believe that I could do it.

I first came into contact with Chrysalis (CARE's affiliate in Sri Lanka) in 2018 and they helped me to buy additional machinery for the business. They also gave me valuable training where I learnt about employing people, the importance of having high quality products and understanding profit and loss. They also

**“Coronavirus hit us hard at the start as we are so dependent on the export market. I feared that my business would completely collapse. Now we are diversifying and developing new products for the local market.”**

connected me with new buyers, which opened up many new opportunities.

One of the challenges I have faced is getting business loans. I think financial institutions are reluctant to provide women with loans as they don't believe we can make enough income and repay. Often, they ask us for land as collateral, but this is usually in the man's name. I think the banks should develop special low-interest loans for women entrepreneurs. Since starting out I have managed to take out and fully repay a loan and I hope we can get a new one to expand the business.

The expectations put on women in our society can also be a challenge for business women. Here in Sri Lanka, women are expected to do all the household chores. As my business has grown, my husband has thankfully seen the importance of helping me more at home. My employees are often surprised to hear that he has cooked dinner for us. I have seen some of their husbands changing their attitude, they have cut down their drinking and violence towards their families.

I also have a job as a Government teacher, so when I'm at the school my husband oversees the business. Between us we define our roles and responsibilities. He manages production, orders, marketing, machinery repairs and the collection of coconut husks. I manage the staff, accounting, machine operations and arranging

the final products for transportation. We want to teach our son that there's nothing that can only be done by a man or only by a woman.

Coronavirus hit us hard at the start as we are so dependent on the export market. We had to completely stop production, we had no income and I had large amounts of stock I could not sell. I feared that my business would completely collapse and I was worried about not being able to pay my staff. Now we are diversifying and building a more local customer base. We are also developing new products, such as coir rope and broomsticks which are in high demand at the moment, as well as trialling making compost from waste coir dust.

I am proud of this enterprise because we provide employment for women in our community, so they can feed their families. My dream is to develop my business into a large-scale company, directly exporting abroad. I also want to employ and train at least fifty women living in poverty, including those with disabilities.

Investing in women entrepreneurs is a win-win situation. It benefits not only us individual women, but also our wider communities and our local economies. I know that as one woman I am already having a big impact!

**Sharmini Thiyakaran**  
Coir Manufacturer

# Introduction

Despite growing up hungry or with no education, women across the globe have shown themselves to be astute business women, able to support their families and communities. Through CARE's Women in Enterprise programme, funded by the H&M Foundation, almost 270.000 women have been supported since 2014, including through improved business conditions and access to funds and skills. From 2017-2020 the programme ran in Guatemala, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Peru, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Yemen and this report includes action-based research from that period. The success of the women has been astounding, with their **daily enterprise earnings increasing by an average of 91% across all countries**.

We started writing this global report before the COVID-19 pandemic turned our world upside down. Whilst continuing to celebrate the achievements of women entrepreneurs and setting out the essential components for successful enterprise development with women living in poverty, we need to recognize the havoc this pandemic is wreaking. Coronavirus and the subsequent lockdowns are having a disproportionate impact on the very women entrepreneurs who have worked so hard to lift themselves out of poverty. In Sri Lanka, 90% of women entrepreneurs from our programmes say their income has decreased and their supply chains are disrupted. In Guatemala, 96% say they do not have enough money for basic food items. Many of these women are now on a precipice, at risk of falling straight back into poverty. The findings that we are presenting in this global report can inadvertently play a role in turning this crisis into an opportunity to build a more just and inclusive society.

Through this programme we have identified **five key components for successful enterprise development** amongst women living in low-income communities, which are: strengthening skills; facilitating access to finance and capital; encouraging the power of groups and networks; improving the business environment and; last but by no means least - engaging men and boys [See pages 10-14].

**Power imbalances in the household and harmful gender norms were apparent in every context in which we worked.** As women are taking on increasing responsibilities with their businesses, almost three-quarters still receive no help at all from male family members in the household. Not only are women now running successful businesses, most continue to do all the childcare, cooking and other household chores. Where bespoke training for husbands was delivered, progress was faster.

We know that **entrepreneurship can offer a clear route out of poverty**. The women we work with are committed, innovative and have shown incredible resilience, also in the face of COVID-19. Women represent 31-38% of SMEs in emerging markets and the biggest opportunity for economic growth. The women we work with are having a positive impact on their local communities, not least by employing other local women to lift them out of poverty too. Entrepreneurship is also empowering and through our programme we saw a **33% increase in women taking up leadership positions** within their communities. We have also seen that, when given better access to finance and capital, women are strong savers and borrowers. **Bank account ownership more than doubled globally during the programme.**

**“Together we have been able to provide thousands of women with skills and resources to start their own enterprises, but also focused to eliminate the structural barriers that female entrepreneurs experience. Investing in women is one of the most efficient ways to drive positive change and economic prosperity.”**

**Diana Amini, Global Manager, H&M Foundation**

This progress - and decades of work on gender equality - is now under threat. We will not stand by and watch that go to waste. Investment in women entrepreneurs living in poverty is essential, now more than ever. Clear targets on gender equality and achieving economic justice and rights for women have been set by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action - we must now work even harder to reach those goals. In December 2019, the World Economic Forum predicted that it would take 257 years before there was economic parity between men

and women, this will no doubt be pushed back even further as a result of COVID-19.

**Supporting women-led micro and small enterprises should be an explicit part of international COVID-19 responses, such as including them in economic relief packages.** With the right support, women can contribute to community resilience and economic recovery during and after this crisis.

**Reintje van Haeringen**  
Chief Executive, CARE Netherlands





**Soro Naminata**  
Peanut & Cotton Farmer, Ivory Coast

Soro Naminata, 30, from Nagbalavogo in the North of Ivory Coast is a peanut and cotton farmer. Married with six children, she grew up in poverty and never went to school: “I am proud of how much my life has improved. The money I earn through my business helps me to support my family and send my children to school.”

Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact: “COVID-19 has affected our life so badly that we are afraid and worried about the future. We can no longer sell our peanuts at the market to earn money for meals. In the future I see starvation and misery. But we are thinking about cultivating other crops, like beans, so we can eat better.”

Soro is a member of a Village Savings & Loans Association, which was set up with support from CARE. Through the group and training,

Soro and her peers have learned about managing their finances, especially during fluctuating growing periods. She explains: “We learned that, after the harvest, we shouldn’t sell all our peanuts. We should hold some back so we can sell them at a higher price later on.”

Managing her income has also become easier: “Previously, I would spend all my money meeting expenses as they arose, whether they were useful or not, and I found myself with no products and no money. Now I can prioritise my income and not waste any of the money I earn.” These financial skills are vital now more than ever as Soro’s income dries up due to the pandemic.

CARE has also connected the group with the bank, Soro adds: “I now have my own bank account and I feel very strong and different

**“Now I can prioritise my income and not waste any of the money I earn.”**

from my life a few years ago. CARE encouraged us to build a good relationship with the bank for the future and to deposit the income we earn.”

Soro’s group has been able to take out a group loan from the bank to buy a huller, which speeds up the production process. She adds: “Before, we spent hours sitting and shelling the peanuts and we lost many customers. Now we have many satisfied customers.” Soro explains that every member is active in the repayment of the loan.

As a group, the women have found solidarity and strength, Soro adds: “Together we are united and much stronger. When you are alone, you face difficulties meeting the bank’s requirements. Together we have more courage.”

Soro’s group is also connected to other villages nearby where they exchange goods. The group has also been visited by Madame Sekongo, a successful local entrepreneur in the farming industry, who was appointed as a role model by CARE to inspire and encourage other women. Soro adds: “Before, women struggled to speak out in the community and defend their rights, including at a commercial level. Now we can express ourselves and set the cost of our goods and negotiate more confidently with buyers. We feel like our opinions are now listened to and we feel involved and respected. The place of women is growing in our communities.”

Despite the destructive impact of COVID-19, Soro still shares a message of hope for the future: “To my sisters around the world, I encourage you not to lose hope. Sooner or later COVID-19 will end, especially if we respect the safety measures.”



Soro (sixth from left) with her fellow cotton growers

# Global Statistics



**268.343**  
women reached in 6 years

**33%**  
increase in  
**leadership** positions

**91%**  
increase in daily  
**enterprise**  
earnings

**91%**  
said **training**  
helped improve  
their businesses



Participants report  
a direct link  
between **training**  
and income increase

**177%**  
increase in **bank account**  
ownership



**55%**  
increase in  
**access to loans**

The average **loan**  
**size** increased  
from 1.230 USD  
to 1.810 USD

**76%** had  
**repaid** their loans,  
others on track to repay

**Joint decision-making** on major  
household purchases increased by **16%**

**Women's sole**  
**ownership of land** was **28%**  
(up from 15%)

**65%** of participants  
were part of a **group**



**78%**  
use their **savings** for  
business purposes  
(up from 53%)

Supported  
**320**  
**Village Savings &  
Loans Associations**  
with 8.730 members  
(West Africa &  
Middle East)

# Country Statistics

**“I used to be afraid, maybe thinking no, I’m not going to be able to do that, because it is difficult. Since receiving the trainings, I realized I could do anything.”**

**Blanca Canto,  
Artisan, Peru**



## Guatemala

- 158% increase in daily business income
- Bank account ownership has grown by 62%
- The average loan size more than doubled
- Time spent on unpaid domestic work decreased by up to 39%
- 30% increase in women owning land in their own name

## Peru

- 83% had used personal savings for business
- 70% increase in access to loans
- New women entrepreneur inclusive legislation in 11 municipalities
- 78% of men and boys support with women’s businesses
- Women’s sole ownership of land increased from 15% to 40%

## Sierra Leone Ivory Coast

- Bank account ownership increased by 388%
- 44% of income reinvested in their businesses
- 72% increase in women’s decision-making on major household purchases
  - 100% increase in leadership positions
- Use of mobile banking increased from 4% to 31%

## Jordan

- Use of mobile banking increased from 0 to 20%
- Campaign with 10 entrepreneur role models reached over 48.000 people
- 57% increase in loan size
- 41% increase in daily household income
- In almost all areas of household decision-making, women’s influence has increased

## Sri Lanka

- 75% increase in support from men and boys with domestic work
- Support from men and boys in the women’s businesses increased by 83%
- 34% increase of joint decision making on how to spend women’s income
- Saving group membership reached 75% (an 82% increase)
- The number of women owning productive assets in their own name doubled



**Fadwa Ahmad Abu Saifan**  
Taxi Driver, Jordan

Fadwa, 49, from Al-Mafraq in Jordan, grew up with eight brothers and sisters in a very conservative and traditional family. She explains: “I think those traditions suffocated me. My dream was to continue my education after high school and to become a nurse.” Now, Fadwa is a mother of five and growing her own business.

Fadwa first came into contact with CARE when she joined a Village Savings & Loans Association where she learned the power of saving money. She explains: “I learned that you can do big things, even with a small amount of money.” During this time Fadwa was co-founding a beauty school, which she managed for two years. Through the Savings Group, she was able to take out a small loan to buy beauty products for the business. Fadwa also received valuable business training from

CARE, which enabled her to prioritise her earnings and better manage her business. She adds: “If women are trained in the right way, miracles will happen.”

With the entrepreneurial experience from the beauty school, Fadwa found a niche in the market for women-only taxi services. However, most of her brothers were against the idea. She explains: “The idea of working women is not tolerated in my community. Not only was I driving a car, but also doing something my community considered taboo. I had to challenge how people saw me in my local community, especially my brothers.” She adds: “Due to the very hard living conditions and lack of income, I think men in our community have become more tolerant and supportive towards women in business. Now, I think men should start believing in women.”

**“If women are trained in the right way, miracles will happen.”**

Due to her success and perseverance as an entrepreneur, Fadwa was invited by CARE Jordan to become a role model for other aspiring women entrepreneurs. She received public speaking training, adding: “I proudly overcame my shy personality and I have become more confident in speaking my mind without fear or hesitation.” She has since toured the country, alongside other role models, sharing her experiences with others. Her main message to other women is: “You can overcome all the obstacles you face. You can do it.”

Fadwa is now applying this positive attitude to the coronavirus pandemic, despite the fact that it is having a devastating impact on her taxi business, which is now on hold: “At first I was depressed because of the lockdown, but I saw

the negative impact I was having on my family. So I decided to get out and volunteer, delivering medication to the elderly and food packages to other vulnerable people. My message to other business owners affected by COVID-19 is to never give up.”

Fadwa has many ambitions for her future. She wants to expand her taxi business, resume her studies, found her own community organisation for women, set up a mechanical car shop for her children and run for Parliament. If she lives by her own motto ‘you can do it’, achieving all these ambitions seems highly possible.

She concludes: “I am proud of myself and who I became. I feel that I now have an identity and a voice of my own after opening this business.”

**Watch the film featuring Fadwa and other role models [here](#)**



Tablet training in Peru



**“Before, I thought that all income was profit, but thanks to the training I learnt how to separate my income from my profit.”**

**Kirupalini Karunakaran**

President of a Weaver’s Cooperative, Sri Lanka

# Essential Enterprise Components

**CARE has identified five key components that have an extremely positive impact on enterprise development and women’s economic justice and rights. These components have been shown to work, alongside a flexible approach and the ability to innovate.**

## 1. Skills Strengthening

Women living in poverty often don’t have access to an education or lifelong learning opportunities, so building up their skills as they embark on their enterprise journey is essential. Women across the seven programme countries showed an intrinsic motivation to be trained. They recognize that skills are a source of independence and empowering themselves. Over 92% of women entrepreneurs said the training helped improve their businesses. Women also indicated a direct link between what they learn in training and an increase in their income.

A combination of developing business and soft skills was key. Business planning and financial literacy training were particularly important to the women, specifically training on managing cashflow and profit, separating household from business expenses and learning how to save. Training in life skills, such as decision-making, self-esteem and negotiation, was also highly valued.

Digital and social media marketing play an increasingly important role and women are keen on developing these skills and putting them into practice. A notable digital innovation in skills strengthening was seen in Peru, where they used an application on tablets, specifically developed for financial literacy training. Here, gamification to demonstrate how to manage your income, had a profoundly positive impact.

Women are also proud of sharing their skills with other women and the knock-on impact of training one woman can bring huge benefits to whole communities. Being in collectives, associations and groups is an enabler for women to access training and to train others. In several places, such as Jordan and West Africa, CARE has increased skills sharing by recruiting role models. Here, experienced business women go out into communities and share their knowledge, showing entrepreneurship as a viable route out of poverty. The message of: “If I did it, so can you” can be incredibly powerful.

## 2. Improving the Business Environment

Formalizing a business, navigating local bureaucracy, influencing policies and procedures or accessing markets and customers can present a challenge for many women, particularly for those who have been marginalized or isolated.

We saw that achieving government registrations, licences and approvals was time consuming and slowed down processes and productivity. Women expressed that government hygiene standards are also difficult to fulfil for their micro and small enterprises, and food and drug licences are difficult to access.

Poor infrastructure, such as roads in remote areas, also presented a barrier for business survival and growth. Despite this, women have found that they can gain new customers and markets by including logistics and delivery in their services, with many women turning to their husbands to support with these activities.

We found that social media and other online platforms play an important role in improving the business environment for women. Many women, particularly those in Middle East who face cultural restrictions on leaving the house, found that social media was an important tool for accessing market information, fixing prices and reaching customers.

One particular innovation was seen in Sierra Leone, where we undertook a full value chain analysis and identified that women had very little access to market information and prices. This meant that they were dependent on intermediaries to buy their products, who were regularly offering them a much lower than market price. CARE worked with the community radio networks to broadcast up-to-date market information, helping women entrepreneurs to better understand where, when and for how much they could sell their products. The Ministry of Agriculture is now financing the full process of collecting and broadcasting market information.

In Peru, we have worked with multiple municipalities to strengthen the position of women entrepreneurs in local decision-making. Following these advocacy activities, women now have a greater voice and influence. New legislation has been introduced in eleven municipalities, specifically focused on supporting women entrepreneurs, such as funding for small businesses now effectively meeting the needs of both men and women. In addition, formal networks of women entrepreneurs have been established in each municipality to actively engage in the development of new policies and procedures. CARE continues to roll out this programme regionally and nationally.

In Sri Lanka, CARE's affiliate Chrysalis is collaborating with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to establish a business service centre in the under-served North of the country. This will act as a one-stop shop for entrepreneurs to register their businesses and to obtain business support.

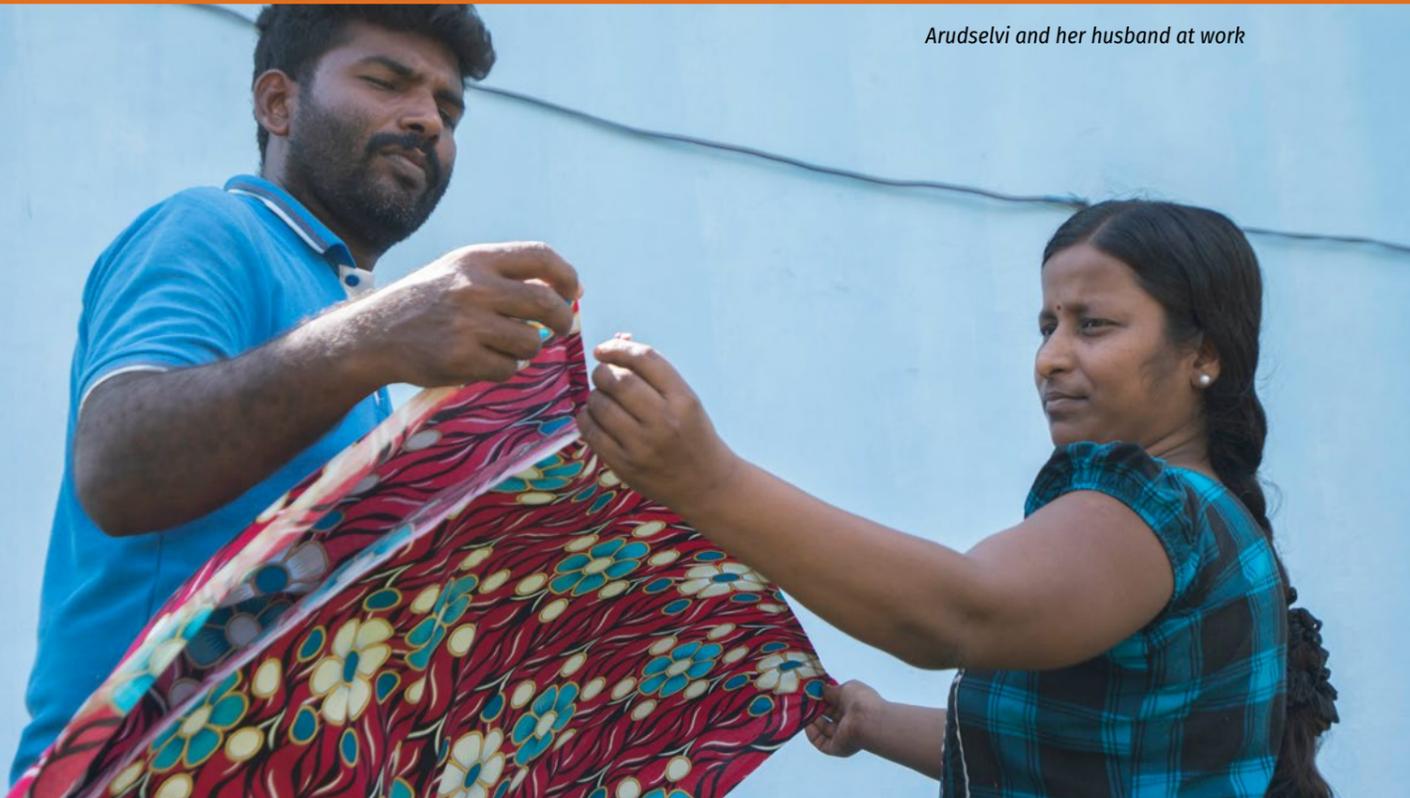
**“Since we started receiving the market prices from CARE, we are much more confident about getting a good price for our goods.”**

**Kaday Kamara (centre)**

Peanut, Fruit & Vegetable Farmer, Sierra Leone



Arudselvi and her husband at work



### 3. Engaging Men and Boys

There were harmful gender norms and power imbalances in the household in every context. Working on changing entrenched gender norms is central to CARE's philosophy. Men and boys were involved in the women's entrepreneurial journeys and invited to join training sessions, celebration events and speaking tours.

A specific emphasis was placed on engaging men in Sri Lanka through gender sensitisation training. This was delivered to both community representatives and the husbands of women entrepreneurs. It resulted in support from men and boys in domestic work increasing by 75% during the programme, and their support in the women's businesses increasing by 83%. By the end of the programme, around 50% of the women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka were being supported by their husbands and sons. While this is a significant improvement, there is still a long way to go to reach gender equality.

In other countries, progress was slower. As women take on increasing responsibilities with their businesses, 72% of women globally still receive no help at all from male family members with domestic work. In Ivory Coast only 1% of women entrepreneurs receive support from men at home. Not only are women now running successful businesses – many providing employment to other women – they continue to do all household work. We also saw increased pressure on relationships between husband and wives when women started dedicating longer hours to their businesses. From the way that women describe their daily routines, it is clear that they still carry the burden of domestic work, with some getting very little sleep.

Despite this unpromising picture at home, there was an uplift of men supporting their wives in their businesses. In Ivory Coast, 45% of women entrepreneurs indicated that their husband or sons supported them in business. In many instances, the women's enterprises turned into family businesses with male family members contributing, for example

with logistics and transporting goods. In Peru, men used to prohibit women from attending training. Here, there was a 19% increase of women being supported by their husbands in their businesses.

Proving themselves as contributors to the household budget made a big impact on a man's willingness to support his wife and we saw an increase in support from husbands, once their wives started making money. We also saw an increase in women becoming more involved in household decisions once they started contributing financially. Joint decision-making on major household purchases increased by 16% on average across the globe, with a notable increase in Sierra Leone of 72%.

In many countries women still rely on men for land and other resources and this is more extreme in remote areas. However, in Ivory Coast, we saw men allocating their land for women to use for their business activities. In some cases, and to avoid conflict, men have signed documents certifying that they have made their land available to women's groups. Chiefs and other senior male figures in the community have also supported the negotiation of land access for women. Programme data showed a global increase in women's sole

**“My husband gets the children ready for school in the morning and prepares breakfast and lunch. I have also taught him to sew, so he can help me with bulk orders in the business.”**

**Arudselvi Jaicilin**

a tailor from Sri Lanka,  
whose husband took part in the training

ownership of land from 15% up to 28% over three years. In Peru this increased from 15% to 40%. In Sierra Leone, we saw joint land ownership between husband and wife increase from 0% to 15%. Despite this positive data, ownership does not equal control and we saw a global decline in women's sole control over the land they cultivate. However, joint control over land increased in Guatemala and Sierra Leone.

Overall, progress towards gender equality was slow, but where bespoke training for husbands was delivered, progress was faster. Such progress should not be underestimated and engaging men and boys is a vital component for effective programming.



A husband taking part in gender sensitisation training in Sri Lanka experiences the heavy load that women carry, both at work and home.

## 4. Access to Finance and Capital

The global statistics speak for themselves when it comes to the importance of access to finance and capital for women entrepreneurs, with 80% of women owned businesses with credit needs being either unserved or underserved.<sup>1</sup>

### Bank accounts

Significant progress was made on access to finance for women entrepreneurs taking part in the programme, with bank account ownership more than doubling over three years across the seven countries. In Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, this more than quadrupled. We also saw an increase in the adoption of mobile banking services, particularly in Sierra Leone where it rose from 4% to 31% and in Jordan where it increased from 0 to almost 20%. Despite this, financial exclusion remains a barrier and less than 50% of women from our programme have a bank account in Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Peru and Jordan.

### Savings Groups

Through this programme, CARE has introduced thousands of women to the concept of collective saving, through our flagship Village Savings & Loans Associations (VSLAs), particularly in West Africa where 98% of programme participants are members of a VSLA. These groups, with no outside investment, are a safe way to save money and take out small loans, and have been the foundation for many micro enterprises. They are also often an important platform from which women can access more formal finance, such as savings accounts and credit products, including group loans. In Sri Lanka we saw an 82% increase in savings groups, with 75% of women entrepreneurs being members by the end of the programme. Savings groups have created group solidarity and strong saving habits.

### Loans

Overall, the share of women entrepreneurs who have accessed a loan increased by 54.5% over three years. In Ivory Coast, this increased by over 80%. Loans tend to be used for start-up costs, purchasing equipment or procuring raw

materials. The average size of loans accessed by women entrepreneurs increased moderately in most countries, from an average of 1.230 USD at baseline to 1.810 USD at endline. This is illustrative of the small size of most enterprises. Most women we work with cannot absorb larger loans of 10.000 USD and up, which is the typical loan sizes that formal financial institutions offer to small businesses. Hence our target group remains underserved by formal financial institutions. Repayments of loans were strong and by the end of the programme, an average 76% of participants had fully repaid their loans, with others on schedule to repay.

In Ivory Coast, CARE provided a revolving loan fund in partnership with Première Agence de Microfinance (PAMF), the largest microfinance provider in the country. This partnership enabled women to access lower interest loans that were larger than they would have been able to access through their savings group. 310 Ivorian women entrepreneurs have

secured loans to grow their businesses and all are successfully repaying them. Building on this, CARE in Ivory Coast also partnered with pan-African commercial bank, Ecobank. This partnership enables low-income women who are members of VSLAs to open up their own personal accounts, as well as access group loans. Ecobank offers flexible repayment terms that acknowledge fluctuating income.

Multiple barriers still exist on access to finance including: conditions that are difficult to meet such as guarantors and collateral requirements; lengthy and daunting paperwork; fear of imprisonment or losing their house if they default; limited flexibility on loan repayment plans; and high interest rates. Partnering with financial institutions has been an effective way of opening up both new opportunities for small business owners, as well as new markets for financial providers. A focus on access to finance for enterprise programming remains essential.

Handing in savings at a VSLA meeting in Ivory Coast



**“We have learned to save money and generate an income, so that we can support our families and send our children to school. Today we can go to the bank with confidence to make transactions like everyone else.”**

**Silue Zahatio**

Peanut & Corn Farmer, Ivory Coast

## 5. Groups and Networks

In addition to savings groups, bringing entrepreneurial women together in other ways, such as through group enterprises, cooperatives or associations, can be very powerful. Working with others can have a positive impact on every aspect of a woman's business, whether that's confidence-building and being able to share ideas and concerns, finding new customers or working together to increase production. By the end of the programme over 65% of programme participants globally were part of a group. This was significantly higher in Guatemala, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast where group membership reached almost 100%, due to the strong culture of cooperatives and savings groups respectively.

Being part of a group also offers important social interaction for improved wellbeing, as well as solidarity, where women help one another through difficult personal or business situations. Our programme data showed that women's groups also have a positive impact on communities. In Ivory Coast one women's group built a health centre in the community.

Women told us that they were motivated to work together towards a common goal and were able to handle larger orders as part of a group. They also had greater purchasing and negotiating power as a collective and had more

access to market opportunities as a group. In Ivory Coast, women were not only sharing market price information amongst their own group, but also sharing it with other women's groups to improve negotiations with intermediaries.

Having a collective voice through a group or network enables women to get involved in decision-making and have influence at a higher level than they would ordinarily be able to have as an individual. We saw a 33% increase in women taking up leadership positions within their communities. In Sierra Leone this doubled, reaching 70%.

In Guatemala the programme supported women to set up collectives and cooperatives. This brought multiple benefits, including supporting members with loans and influencing regional and national policies that affected them. CARE is, alongside its programme participants and other development organisations, advocating for a new law to strengthen the economic position of women in Guatemala. If the national legislation is adopted, women will gain better access to the employment market via improved training and access to finance.

In Peru we supported women to create collective brands and through their marketing activities they were able to explore different marketing channels, including exporting and online sales.

**“The impact of our cooperative goes beyond the 450 women members, as we all share our income with our families and communities. I want to strengthen our cooperative so more women can earn an income.”**

**Sandra Xiquín**

Farmer and President of a Farmer's Cooperative, Guatemala





**Basma Nazer**  
Social Entrepreneur, Jordan

**On Skills Strengthening**

“Learning is the basis of success. I received training before I started my business and was able to share it with the women I work with, so that they too can benefit.”



**Sékongo Dieneba**  
Shea Butter Producer, Ivory Coast

**On Access to Finance & Capital**

“It is the funds from our savings group that are helping my business. This has helped pay for a motorbike to transport the shea butter.”

# Women Mean Business Films

**María Julia Ancajima Prado**  
Beekeeper, Peru

**On Groups & the Business Environment**

“I represent my women’s association. We now have our own label which is a registered trademark. We all put our back into it so we can move forward.”



**Sharmini Thiyakaran**  
Coir Manufacturer, Sri Lanka

**On Engaging Men & Boys**

“I teach my son that there are no specific tasks for men or women. My husband has changed, he helps me in the company and also at home.”





**Ana López**  
Soya Products Manufacturer, Guatemala

Growing up with no father around, Ana and her brothers worked in the fields and made handicrafts to support their mother, a nurse, with household expenses. Now married with two children, Ana from Patzún is one of the founding members of a production cooperative, which was born with the vision of creating economic development opportunities for its all-female members and for fighting malnutrition and hunger in the community. The cooperative produces protein-rich soybean derivatives including milk, cheese, biscuits and pancakes, as well as cosmetics and cleaning products.

The cooperative provides multiple benefits for its members. Ana explains: “As well as providing technical training in food produc-

tion, we also train in leadership and enabling women to exercise their rights.” Being in a group has brought many advantages and the members participate in various networks, including working with others to advocate for a new law in Guatemala to strengthen the economic position of women through improved training and access to finance.

The business training provided by CARE helped the women with the administration and management of the cooperative, as well as product marketing, access to trade fairs and pricing. Ana’s advice to other women starting their own business is: “Be persistent and disciplined with the business administration – that is key.”

**“Men need to start seeing the potential of women – we are also people with business dreams.”**

Unlike many other women in her community, Ana is lucky to have a supportive husband, who encourages and advises her in her work: “In our community men have the power. We have to become more involved as women, so that we too can have a voice and be involved in decision-making. Men need to start taking women more seriously and see our potential – we are also people with business dreams.” But it is not just men whose opinions have changed, Ana adds: “I now have more respect for women entrepreneurs – it is not easy and requires determination and persistence.”

Having started out in Ana’s house, the cooperative now has its own production building with all the necessary health and safety measures to enable the business to grow. Ana proudly adds: “We have secured our first commercial contract.”

Ana knows that to grow, the cooperative will need financing, but there are fears amongst the partners about the risks involved and the interest charged. Ana adds: “Many of our members don’t know how to read or write well and they are afraid of the paperwork involved in getting a loan, and of being able to repay.” Ana would like to see the banks being more flexible in their requirements for women entrepreneurs: “The main barrier is that many women work in the informal economy and cannot prove their income, which is a primary requirement when applying for a loan.”

For the future, Ana would like to see the cooperative continue to promote the economic development of women by providing an income to its members. When Ana finally speaks about what she is most proud of, she simply concludes: “I have lost the fear of failure.”



## Fatmata Sesay Hairdresser & Trainer, Sierra Leone

Fatmata, 41, is a widow with four children. Despite growing up in poverty with little schooling, she is now the owner of one of the best hairdressing salons in Makeni, in the north of Sierra Leone, employing over fifty young women.

Fatmata, the daughter of farmers, grew up with 40 brothers and sisters. “I finished school at the age of eight and when I was 14 my parents sent me to early marriage.” She started to earn money through selling soap and palm oil, but when civil war broke out, she lost everything: “We were barely able to eat, let alone have a place to sleep. I had to scavenge on dumped fish fins.”

Tired with her situation, Fatmata set out to find a source of income that could support her family. In 2000, she started as an assistant hairdresser, which enabled her to save enough money to enrol at the Aframeric Institute of Cosmetology.

After graduating, she established her own centre for hairdressing, starting out with fifty thousand Leones – around 10USD at the time. Soon afterwards, she was contracted by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration to train 160 Women in cosmetology. This was followed by other training contracts for vulnerable women, including Ebola survivors.

**“My biggest business achievement is having trained and empowered many vulnerable girls.”**

Fatmata is no stranger to surviving a crisis, adding: “I was able to overcome the civil war and the Ebola crisis as a business-woman through hard work, determination and engaging in business that was more essential for that period.” Now, Fatmata faces a new crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic.

To date, Fatmata has mentored over 1,000 women and girls and most of them are successful in their own businesses. Fatmata adds: “Above all, my biggest business achievement is having trained and empowered many vulnerable girls.”

Understanding the importance of skills development, Fatmata enrolled in an adult literacy programme in 2010 and she can now read and write. Having had a very limited education herself, she is particularly proud to have been able to educate all her children to university level.

In 2016, Fatmata was invited by CARE to become a role model in her region and inspire other women entrepreneurs. She explains: “I encourage women to support one another.” She has also received financial support from CARE to help construct her own hairdressing salon, where she trains other young women.

Fatmata is finally beginning to see societal change: “Most men have changed their

mindset about women entrepreneurs and we now command higher respect and support from men. I had to fight my way through it, but women are now beginning to speak out. Thanks to changes in local regulations, more women are beginning to own businesses.”

Sadly, Fatmata’s vision to open new salons across the country, so she can train more vulnerable women, is now on hold. She explains: “The COVID-19 outbreak has meant I have had to partially close my salon and I’ve stopped my students from coming in. My customers are telling me they prefer to use their money to buy food, than to do their hair. This has drastically decreased my income.”

Fatmata is concerned for the future of her country, explaining: “Most families will not survive the economic hardship and most households will not be able to provide basic food for their family. Hunger will kill people instead of the virus. My biggest fear is the lack of adequate medical services to treat those with the virus.”

She concludes: “My message to small business owners during this crisis is: be patient, focused and committed. Look into switching to alternative businesses that are more essential and can sell at a faster pace. And continue to adhere to the health and safety guidelines for COVID-19.”

# The Business Case

## A Major Opportunity

**Enterprise development is a recognised pathway to achieving women's economic justice and rights. Entrepreneurship represents a large proportion of women's paid work, and women represent 31-38% of all small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging markets.<sup>2</sup>**

**Women mean business.** This is particularly the case in low-income countries. 37.8% of women in low-income countries intend to start a business within three years.<sup>3</sup> Women are committed to their businesses: Participants in CARE's Women in Enterprise programme re-invested 39% of their income back into their business. The number of women entrepreneurs using their savings for business purposes increased from 53% to 78%.

**Women represent the biggest opportunity for economic growth.** Research finds that, in a full-potential scenario in which women play an identical role in labour markets to men, as much as 28 trillion USD, or 26%, could be added to global annual GDP in 2025. Even if all countries were to match the progress toward gender parity of the best performer in their region, it could produce a boost to annual global GDP of as much as 12 trillion USD, or 11%, in 2025.<sup>4</sup>

**Women increase their income and savings.** Globally in the Women in Enterprise programme, daily enterprise earnings increased by 91%. Bank account ownership more than doubled globally, and in Sierra Leone it more than quadrupled. Between 2015-2018 the programme in Ethiopia, which supported 5,000 women, saw an average 500% income increase. Approximately 70% of the women did not have any savings in the beginning of the project - this number was reduced to 3.6% in 2018.

**Investing in low-income communities creates impact.** Over 92% of women entrepreneurs said the training helped improve their businesses. Our data shows that groups and networks build women's agency, providing them with increased access to finance, knowledge and skills. There were multiple examples of community impact during the programme, such as in Ivory Coast where one women's group built a community health centre with their group savings. There

were also several cases of conflict resolution in communities, following training.

**Women stay in business.** Across 59 countries, the average global rate for business discontinuance is about 10% lower for women than for men.<sup>5</sup> Women entrepreneurs are generally known for strong survival skills in business compared to men, which could be explained by a more carefully planned approach to business strategy.<sup>6</sup>

**Women are good customers.** Data from banks serving 22 million customers in 18 countries shows that women outpace men in overall growth in volume of credit (15% vs. 10%) and

volume of deposits (17% vs. 14%). Women are strong savers and prudent borrowers, with lower nonperforming loans than men (2.9% vs. 4.2%).<sup>7</sup>

**Entrepreneurship is empowering.** Running a business and having an income helped women gain a stronger position at home and in the community. Our data shows that women's achievements make them feel empowered: having more income, paying the bills without problems, being able to make decisions and being respected by family and community members. We also saw a 33% increase in women taking up leadership positions within their communities.



**“It is very fulfilling to prove to everyone that I can be the backbone of the family. Through careful planning and good management, I made it happen.”**

**Manahi Ayyash Dahabreh**  
Pharmacy Owner, Jordan

## The Barriers

**Despite the opportunities, investments in women entrepreneurs living in poverty remain limited. Women also continue to face a multitude of barriers to entrepreneurial success. The COVID-19 crisis may further widen this gap.**

**Limited access to finance:** Women entrepreneurs have less access to finance, partly due to the need for collateral. 80% of companies with credit needs run by women are either unserved or under-served.<sup>8</sup> Globally, the unmet financial need of microenterprises is highest in the poorest regions: 89% of their funding needs in low-income, and 94% in low-middle income countries remain unmet. This finance gap represents 20–21% of the GDP in these countries.<sup>9</sup> Women-owned businesses account for an outsized share of the finance gap: The total MSME finance gap for women is estimated to be valued at 1.7 trillion USD.<sup>10</sup>

**Harmful gender norms:** Social norms can determine which activities are appropriate for women and men and prescribe gender roles that burden women with household responsibilities, limiting options for working outside the home.<sup>11</sup> Gender norms can also prevent women from leaving home unaccompanied, talking to men outside the family (like bank agents and retailers) or taking out a business loan, even informally. Our data showed that 22% of husbands decide what business their wife should engage in.

**Lack of business assets:** Land is perhaps the most important economic asset, yet women account for only 12.8% of agricultural landholders in the world.<sup>12</sup> In many communities, women are not entitled to own land and other productive assets, or need permission from their husband in order to use them.

**Unpaid care:** Unpaid care limits women's opportunity to start or expand a business: Women on average do three times as much

unpaid care and domestic work as men.<sup>13</sup> As women are taking on increasing responsibilities with their businesses, our data showed that 72% still receive no help at all from male family members in the household.

**Lack of education and skills:** Women have lower average levels of education and business experience. 67.8% of programme participants had either not completed any education or only up to primary school. In many cases women do not have the right connections to help them develop their skills and are less likely than men to personally know an entrepreneur that they could learn from.<sup>14</sup> Financial literacy is paramount when setting up a business, for example knowing how to separate household and business expenses, or how to access financial services.

**Inaccessible business environment:** Women entrepreneurs face a multitude of barriers and in many countries, laws and political systems disadvantage women. Women have fewer professional networks which prevents them from productively utilising their earnings. Our data showed that formalizing businesses and understanding local bureaucracy can also be a challenge, as well as accessing new markets or customers due to social norms or movement restrictions.

**The impact of COVID-19:** COVID-19 poses an immediate and severe threat to women entrepreneurs. Besides the impact of the virus itself, the economic consequences are devastating. Women entrepreneurs have been reporting income loss and disruption of their supply chains. In Sri Lanka, 90% of women entrepreneurs participating in our projects are seeing

an income decrease as a result of COVID-19, and in 65% of the enterprises, all employees have lost their jobs as a result of the crisis. A massive 90% of entrepreneurs report that their supply chains are disrupted. Business owners are directly impacted themselves and are equally concerned for the people they employ and their families whose livelihoods depend on these businesses.

In Guatemala, 96% of women participating in CARE's economic empowerment programmes have reported that they do not have enough money to buy basic food items. Initial assessments show that micro and small businesses in Guatemala are one of the most affected groups. Of those surveyed, 96% report that the crisis has increased unemployment in their community.<sup>15</sup>

**“I urge governments to put women and girls at the centre of their efforts to recover from COVID-19... Measures to protect and stimulate the economy, from cash transfers to credits and loans, must be targeted at women.”<sup>18</sup>**

**António Guterres**

Secretary-General of the United Nations



## Recommendations

### Meaningful support of women entrepreneurs in low-income communities requires a multifaceted approach:

- **Include low-income communities:** When funding or supporting women's enterprise development, ensure this includes women in low-income communities. Enterprise development in these communities provides a pathway to ending (extreme) poverty, advances gender equality and improves women's economic justice and rights.
- **Invest in skills development:** Support women with effective business, management, and life skills training to help them advance their businesses and provide a valuable contribution to their families, communities and economies.
- **Listen to women:** Strengthen women's visibility, collective voice and representation, for example by supporting role models. Take a participatory approach with women in the development of programming. Invest in redressing harmful social norms that restrict women.
- **Invest in peer support:** Support the development of women's groups and networks to help strengthen women's agency. Peer support can also increase access to finance, knowledge and skills.
- **Improve financial inclusion:** Develop gender-specific financial products and services, for example by removing collateral requirements or offering alternative solutions, such as loans based on savings group transactions and activities.
- **Engage men and boys:** Men are critical partners in increasing women's agency by sharing unpaid care responsibilities, supporting enterprise development and increasing women's access to markets, products and services.
- **Improve the business environment:** Work together with local, regional and national Governments to: allocate funding; increase participation in decision-making; improve accessibility for women, such as more accessible business registration processes and better access to markets.
- **Support the business case and knowledge base:** Gather evidence on value generation and business development, and collect sex and age disaggregated data on enterprise development.

### COVID-19 response: Put gender equality front and centre

The COVID-19 crisis risks losing decades of progress on women's economic justice and rights. It creates an even greater urgency for investing in women entrepreneurs. Here's what has to happen:

- Provide immediate financial support, including cash grants to meet basic needs.
- Ensure women's voice, co-leadership, and balanced representation in decision-making bodies and processes.
- Collect sex and age disaggregated data. Collecting this is essential to making informed decisions and providing gender responsive support to business owners and economic recovery.
- Integrate a gender lens throughout the economic response to ensure relief packages reach women and meet their needs.



**“COVID-19 has affected us economically and emotionally. The worst-case scenario is that we will have to shut down the business. If food starts to run out, we don't know how we will provide for our children.”**

**Gilda Ixen**

President of a Women's Cooperative in Guatemala



## Narcisa Cruz Sosa

### Ceramics Artisan, Peru

As a teenager, Narcisa Cruz Sosa from Chulucanas in the north of Peru supported her mother with ceramics handicraft work. Narcisa, 48, now dominates the techniques that today make her a recognized ceramics artisan.

Narcisa set up her own association in 2008, she explains: “We started out with eight women and now we just keep on growing.” The association has won multiple quality awards and the group uses clay techniques inherited from the Tallán and Vicús cultures.

The association has since benefited from the support of CARE. Narcisa explains: “CARE offers a lot of training for women entrepreneurs covering leadership, self-esteem, how to work with buyers, developing business ideas and more. Through the training I have

learned many new business skills including how to develop proper systems which helps me to track my cash flow and to manage supply and demand. I now better understand if we are earning or losing money with our products and I have a much clearer idea on costs. Going to training isn’t wasting time, it’s investing time.”

As with many artisans in her community, COVID-19 is having a destructive impact: “My business has completely stopped, we are not producing anything. We cannot buy the materials for our business and nobody is going to buy ceramics at the moment, the most important thing is food. Thankfully, CARE taught us how to save, so I have a little nest egg to keep us going for now.”

Narcisa adds: “Thanks to the training, my self-esteem has really grown and I now have a bigger voice to speak out. Before, I was afraid of being a business woman, but now I value my own work. The training has been a really good opportunity for our members to know that they can progress and get their products to more people.”

CARE has also linked the association with regional and local Government fairs and other events. Narcisa adds: “This gives us a lot of exposure. Through the fairs we have also been able to meet other artisans who have different and better experiences that we can learn from. Our association has now written to the Municipality asking for food parcels for those artisans most affected by COVID-19.”

Pre COVID-19, the women received seed capital from CARE, enabling them to buy kilns and other equipment for their workshop. CARE also supported the women to register a collective

brand, enabling them to collectively strengthen their reach and income.

Narcisa is now President of the ‘Consortium of Women Entrepreneurs of Piura’ which represents 21 associations of women entrepreneurs, with 300 members. It was in this capacity that she spoke at an event in the Netherlands in 2019, organised by CARE with the Dutch Government and Swedish Embassy, on access to finance for women entrepreneurs. She explains: “I want to let people know that women are capable of starting and growing their own businesses and contributing to their communities.”

As Narcisa continues to see her influence broaden across the globe, she recognises the value of working together: “As individual people we sometimes can’t achieve the things we want to, but by uniting as a group we are stronger.”

**“As individuals we sometimes can’t achieve the things we want to, but by uniting as a group we are stronger.”**



Narcisa (3rd from front) at the event in the Netherlands



# About CARE

**CARE is a leading humanitarian and development organisation working in 100 countries to fight global poverty. CARE helps people in some of the world's most challenging locations to establish a better existence. We fight poverty by battling inequality. We do this by providing emergency assistance, by facilitating women's entrepreneurship and by stimulating participation in the decision-making process. We also help improve communities' resilience to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. We distinguish ourselves by our tailored approach: we consult closely with local partners and communities to determine what is required and what works. Because only by working together can we achieve sustainable results.**

## Data collection

- Quantitative and qualitative data from seven countries, collected 2017–2020
- Endline and baseline surveys conducted with 1.138 participants
- 397 in-depth interviews and 144 focus groups with programme participants

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Women mean business  
Invest in us  
Invest in me