



Women in Business

Entrepreneurship as a pathway to gender equality

July, 2022



Women's Entrepreneurship

Gender inequality remains one of the most fundamental sources of inequality in the world today. Women have fewer opportunities than men to work outside the home, earn money and build up assets. Less than two thirds of women are in the labour force, compared to 93 per cent of men. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities.

Enterprise development in low-income communities provides an important pathway to ending (extreme) poverty, advances gender equality and helps achieve women's economic justice and rights. CARE is committed to supporting women entrepreneurs to build their business, gain an income and lift themselves out of poverty.

CARE Nederland has implemented the Women in Enterprise programme, supporting women's entrepreneurship in seven countries. The programme has supported over 270.000 women, including through improved business conditions, access to finance and skills strengthening. It resulted in a 91% increase in daily enterprise earnings, a 177% increase in bank account ownership, and a 33% increase in leadership positions. The [Women Mean Business](#) global report on women's entrepreneurship provides more insights, stories and strategies from the Women in Enterprise programme.

About CARE Nederland

CARE Nederland is a member of CARE International, a confederation of organisations working together to save lives, end poverty and achieve social justice. Our network spans over 100 countries across the world.

CARE's work focuses on achieving equal rights and opportunities. In the strategy period 2022-2026, CARE Nederland implements programmes across three pillars: women's rights, humanitarian action, and sustainable livelihoods.

During this strategy period CARE Nederland expects to reach at least ten million people living in fragile contexts by working on systems change, and by implementing programmes for direct impact in low-income communities.

By consulting closely with partners, communities and governments close to impact, we are able to determine a tailored approach. Because only by working together can we bring about sustainable results.

“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, Sri Lanka
Women in Enterprise programme participant



Proven strategies

After decades of working in partnership with women around the globe, CARE has developed proven strategies to support women's entrepreneurship. When applied together, they create direct impact for women and help change the systems that keep poverty in place. CARE's flagship approach to collective saving, [Village Savings and Loans Associations](#) (VSLAs), is an integral part of CARE's community engagement and support for women entrepreneurs.

These are the five key strategies that together promote women's entrepreneurship:

1. Strengthening women's knowledge and skills.
2. Promoting women's access to financial resources.
3. Supporting women's access to markets.
4. Challenging discriminatory social norms and gender roles.
5. Advocating for supportive legal and regulatory frameworks.

1. Strengthening women's knowledge and skills

Women living in poverty often don't have access to an education or lifelong learning opportunities. CARE strengthens the skills they need to work as entrepreneurs and gain an income. A combination of business and personal skills is key to being successful as an entrepreneur.

Our business skills trainings include modules on developing a business plan, managing cashflow and profit, separating household from business expenses and developing a saving habit. Small-scale farmers are supported in specific areas of expertise according to their needs. CARE's [Farmers' Field](#)

[and Business School](#) curriculum includes sessions on marketing and gender equality in addition to sustainable agricultural practices.

To strengthen personal skills, including leadership, decision-making, self-esteem and negotiation strategies, CARE provides training and works with experienced businesswomen as mentors. We link up with existing groups and networks, to make sure local experts or peers are equipped with CARE's tools and information to further disseminate in other settings.

2. Promoting women's access to financial resources

A lack of access to financial resources is one of the major barriers to women's economic participation in low-income communities. Financial inclusion of women is one of the best ways to break the cycle of poverty. CARE has introduced millions of women to the concept of collective saving, through the flagship VSLAs. These informal groups, with no outside investment, are a safe way to save money and take out small loans, and have been the foundation for many microenterprises.

CARE also facilitates women's access to formal finance such as savings accounts, credit products and digital financial services. We do this by partnering with financial service providers, leveraging VSLAs as platforms to link women entrepreneurs to financial products and services that are developed to meet their needs. [CARE's report on partnerships with financial service providers](#) includes an overview of over 90 partnerships across the confederation, as well as lessons drawn from these partnerships to better serve the women and communities CARE works with.



Sharmini Thiyakaran, Sri Lanka

Coir manufacturer grows her business

Sharmini Thiyakaran lives in Konavil in Sri Lanka. She owns a manufacturing business, processing the husks of coconuts for fertiliser, mattress fibres and brushes. Sharmini employs women from her local community and exports to places like China, South Africa and the UK.

After setting up her business, Sharmini came into contact with Chrysalis (CARE's affiliate in Sri Lanka). They helped her buy additional machinery and provided valuable training about employing people, the importance of having high quality products, and

understanding profit and loss. They also connected her with new buyers.

Sharmini had to overcome social norms as a business owner. "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. We want to teach our son that there's nothing that can only be done by a man or only by a woman."



Impact of advocacy successes in Peru

Support for women entrepreneurs

In Peru, CARE's programme did not only support women entrepreneurs directly through trainings and networks, but also through advocating with government institutions for lasting change.

Institutionalizing CARE's approaches

CARE worked with universities to validate our programme approaches and promote them among local and regional governments. We also strengthened the capacities of women entrepreneurs to advocate and make their voices heard by public representatives in their regions. These efforts resulted in inclusive government policies scaling up proven approaches to support women entrepreneurs in the long term.

Supportive local policies

CARE's work led to the approval of a regional programme and 13 municipal ordinances across two provinces, which focus on allocating budget and organizing activities specifically to support women's entrepreneurship. For example, municipalities are now organizing trade fairs, networking events and training programmes. They have also allocated municipal staff to advise businesswomen.

5-year programme

In the region of Huancavelica, the plans are part of a regional 5-year programme through which 19.5 million USD were allocated to support women in the region. Over 9,300 entrepreneurs have benefited so far. Advocacy successes like these create an enabling business environment for women and contribute to systemic change in support of gender equality.

3. Supporting women's access to markets

Barriers to accessing markets affect women's earnings and business growth. These include poor infrastructure, cultural restrictions on leaving the house, and limited access to market information. CARE supports women to overcome barriers and find new customers, for example by collective marketing, branding, and sharing transport costs with other women. Many women gain support from their husbands to include delivery in their services. CARE also works with community radio stations to provide women entrepreneurs with up-to-date market information on where, when and for what price they can sell their products. We link women to trade fairs and online marketing platforms to find new customers. This has proven to be particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Working with positive and relatable role models;
- Training key government officers and financial service providers about their gendered biases and behaviours towards women, and how to change them;
- Supporting women to join forces in new or existing groups and social movements, to raise their voices and address common barriers together.

CARE is committed to creating sustainable results and therefore monitors and measures all strategies, including on [social norms change](#).

4. Challenging discriminatory social norms and gender roles

Discriminatory social norms form a major barrier to women's full participation in society. We challenge these norms through a variety of interventions:

- [Engaging with men and boys](#) to get their support, promote positive masculinities and act as allies, for example through reflection groups and couple dialogues on gender roles;

5. Advocating for supportive legal and regulatory frameworks

Advocacy is an integral part of CARE's work to promote women's entrepreneurship. Together with women entrepreneurs and allies, we engage with power holders at different levels of the government and the private sector to advocate for more inclusive policies, procedures and legislation to meet women's needs and demands.

[CARE's advocacy handbook](#) provides the approaches, techniques and additional resources to integrate advocacy into our work.





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Financial inclusion of women entrepreneurs

Queen Máxima of The Netherlands visited Ivory Coast in June 2022 in her capacity as the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance for Development. In this role she serves as a strong advocate for financial inclusion of women entrepreneurs in low-income commu-

nities. Queen Máxima visited one of the Village Savings and Loan Associations that have been supported by CARE Ivory Coast, and spoke with various women entrepreneurs. There she emphasised that access to financial services offers a route out of poverty, offers development opportunities and improves people's lives.

Soro Naminata, Ivory Coast

Managing finances with her own bank account

Soro Naminata, 30, from 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.

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. These financial skills were more vital than ever as Soro's income dried up during the pandemic.

Managing her income has 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."

CARE has also connected the group with the bank. "I now have my own bank account and I feel very strong and different 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 also 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."



Fragile contexts

Women show enormous resilience in building and sustaining their businesses under difficult circumstances. The pandemic is the best-known, but hardly the only challenge they overcame. For example, women in Sri Lanka built and sustained their business in the aftermath of a civil war. Women are also increasingly forced to adapt to the devastating impact of climate change.

CARE joins the entrepreneurs in adapting to change: having worked in complex settings for decades, we know how to adjust to changing circumstances. We were quick to respond to the pandemic by reporting on the immediate impact on women, advocating for additional support for low-income communities, and adjusting our activities. For example, we strengthened women's digital skills and linked them to online courses and market platforms. This enabled them to serve customers and access information during lockdowns and for the years to come.



Loving Kitchen

Enterprise development for refugees and host communities in Jordan

Asma is a Syrian woman who was forced to flee to Jordan after her house was bombed during the war. In Jordan, she enrolled in CARE's project 'A new road for Syrian refugees'.

The project supports both Syrian and Jordanian women to start a business. Here she met Fasayel, a Jordanian woman who had recently moved and had started her own food business. The two women, both new to the community and both running a food business, became friends.

With support from the VSLA that was set up by CARE, and the business training they received, Asma and Fasayel started working together. Now they run 'Matbakh Al-Mahabeh', or 'Loving Kitchen', a food business of which they share the profits. The support they received helped the women develop their business and become valued members of the community.



A different approach. A fairer world.

Partnerships are at the heart of our goal to defeat poverty and achieve social justice. CARE works with non-governmental organisations, government agencies, corporations, foundations and donors to maximise our joint impact.

In our partnerships we all share the ambition to eradicate poverty and achieve social justice. Together we can achieve the best results. Get in touch to discuss the possibilities to work together for a fairer world.

Through our programmes and by working on systems change, CARE Nederland contributes to the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):



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