Women’s entrepreneurship takes center stage at the 15th session of UNIDO’s General Conference

The 15th session of UNIDO’s General Conference featured an interregional debate specifically on women entrepreneurs and their role in inclusive and sustainable industrial development - “Empowering Women: Fostering Entrepreneurship”. With hundreds of delegates in attendance, the debate marked a milestone in UNIDO’s efforts towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women.

“Women are the excluded engine of the industrial revolution.”

Dessima Williams

The debate was organized by UNIDO’s Gender Mainstreaming Steering Committee in coordination with the Rural Entrepreneurship Development and Human Security Unit, and moderated by Ambassador Martin Sadjik, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Austria to the United Nations in New York. The panel consisted of both practitioners and experts on women entrepreneurship, and moreover, champions for women’s empowerment, gender equality and the advancement of women’s rights, including: Gerard Finnegan (Former Director, International Labour Organization), Vidyani Hettigoda (Director, Siddhalepa Group of Companies), Eva Muraya (CEO, Brand Strategy and Design EA Limited), Shahina Waheed (National Programme Officer, UNIDO Pakistan), and Dessima Williams (Director, Grenada Education and Development Programme and former Ambassador of Grenada to the United Nations and Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States).

While delving into the critical issues surrounding gender and industry, the panel discussion was spirited, dynamic and forward looking. Through recounting personal journeys as women entrepreneurs or professional anecdotes of working to-

Latest News

- The GMSC initiated Gender Mainstreaming Training for the BIT branch in December 2013. Training workshop scheduled in January 2014.
- The GMSC’s newly produced brochure on women’s entrepreneurship is now available online!
Towards gender equality in the field, the real life experiences of the panel brought to life the challenges that women entrepreneurs face and the policies and partnerships that are needed for them to succeed. The panel continued the discussion by exploring what needs to be done for transformative change to happen, including:

- Coordination among all stakeholders to overcome deep seated socio-cultural barriers
- Better access and quality of education for girls and women both traditional education and life skills (e.g. risk taking, negotiation)
- Reform at the policy level to create enabling environments for women entrepreneurs
- Creation of business growth centers for women entrepreneurs which would provide trainings, technologies, finance
- A focus on scaling up women owned micro-enterprises and support for growth-oriented enterprises
- Promotion of women’s groups, associations and networks for mentorship and coaching

Also present in the audience was one of the 2013 SEED Gender Equality Award recipients, Irene Hofmeijer. Hofmeijer is the innovator behind the Lima-based social enterprise L.O.O.P. (Life out of Plastic).

**Winners of SEED Gender Equality Awards 2013**

Together with UN Women and supported by the international law firm Hogan Lovells, UNIDO jointly sponsored the 2013 SEED Gender Equality Awards to support the most innovative and promising women-led social or environmental start-up enterprises.

This year’s SEED Gender Equality Award winners are both organizations from Latin America: L.O.O.P. (Peru) and Provokame (Columbia).

L.O.O.P or Life Out Of Plastic is a 100% women-owned organization that designs and sells green products such as reusable bags and fleece made from rPET fibre - a textile derived from bottle recycling.

PROVOKAME produces innovative 100% biodegradable plates, made from natural fibres and recycled paper, which are also implanted with seeds. The enterprise trains and employs local women living in rural areas in the plate production process.

For more information, please visit [www.seedinit.org](http://www.seedinit.org)

*Source: SEED*
**An Interview with Gerry Finnegan**

**Q:** How did you first get involved in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment?

**A:** I think I was sensitive to it for many years, but I would say that the first real occasion when it really clicked that I needed to pay more attention to women in my work was during my very first project with the ILO. We discovered very quickly that about 80% of the young people who came, were young men, only 20% were young women. That was a bit of a shock, and we might’ve had that impression, but it’s more striking when you see it written down in numbers. It was very stark feedback, and that meant that it required remedial action. We had a baseline, and we wanted to make sure that we could get above that baseline of 20% female participation.

During this project we entered into a strategic partnership with a women’s organisation, the YWCA, as we thought this would be a good way of getting more women into the project, and in fact that happened. The figure for young women increased to 40% and above, and that isn’t to say that the YWCA only let women onto the programmes, as they also encouraged young men’s participation. But certainly it was a lesson for me that you can’t just say “here is a programme for youth”, and assume that it will be equally taken up by both women and men. It is very important to think about the differences between young women and young men:

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you need to send out different messages to them, to get them involved. So that was really the start for me – a sort of “light bulb” lesson. That was way back in 1988, exactly a quarter of a century ago.

Q: During your time at ILO, you developed the WEDGE programme. What were the fundamental pillars, and how did these feed into the success of the programme?

A: The first pillar was about developing a solid knowledge base. This means trying to get as much information as possible about the number of women entrepreneurs, the size of their businesses, the sectors they work in. In addition to that, it was about finding out what existed in terms of support for women entrepreneurs – what we call business advisory services, and financial support. It was important to identify good practices that could be replicated.

The second pillar was about advocacy and voice for women entrepreneurs. We worked at strengthening some associations of the women entrepreneurs, the size of their businesses, and member-oriented. In addition, we promoted the image of women entrepreneurs, and highlighted the contribution that they were making at the country level. We organised events known as the “Month of the Woman Entrepreneur”, and these included exhibitions, conferences, seminars, street parades, all of which aimed at celebrating women's achievements in relation to entrepreneurship.

The third WEDGE pillar was based on the development of appropriate support services for the women entrepreneurs. There are many training programmes and training manuals for small business that are gender neutral. If you run a small business as women or as a man, you are likely to get some benefit from these programmes. But it was also apparent that there was a need to develop materials that really addressed the situation and needs of women entrepreneurs. WEDGE produced a set of training materials on the theme of “Gender and Entrepreneurship Together.” Those first three letters G.E.T. were used to give the training the title of “GET Ahead for Women in Enterprise”, and the manual was translated into several languages.

The fourth pillar was about developing partnerships. This was a vitally important pillar. The ILO is a relatively large organisation, just as UNIDO. The first partnership that I developed was with the ILO’s Gender Bureau, and I made sure that WEDGE was working closely with them, and they in turn supported my work.

These were the main four WEDGE pillars: Knowledge, Advocacy, Services, and Partnerships.

Q: What lessons can UNIDO take on board?

A: I have no doubt about the knowledge one; I think you need a knowledge base to convince some of the colleagues that there are women entrepreneurs out there and that they need support. So that’s one thing.

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I think that it would be very easy for UNIDO to enter into partnership, or even dare I say, take the lead in partnerships in relation to women in industry. I don’t think there’s any other organisation at the moment that is so well-placed to be able to move forward in this area- in creating jobs in the real economy. So I think that UNIDO has a great role to play.

And the other area that I think UNIDO has already captured, in talking about gender equality and em-

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powerment of women, is to make sure that gender should be mainstreamed in all programmes. How can women and men contribute to a project, how can they benefit from a project? And what happens if we don’t apply that.

Q: Taking from your long-standing experience in enterprise development, what do you think is the added value of implementing a gender perspective into UNIDO projects?

A: UNIDO is well known for its technical expertise in relation to enterprise and industry upgrading, technology upgrading, improving productivity, improving competitiveness. I feel that a lot of women entrepreneurs need all of that type of assistance and support. It’s fantastic to see that UNIDO over the past few years has been giving greater attention to these approaches, and bringing its expertise to bear in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Q: In your opinion how can we encourage more boys and men to be involved in gender equality?

A: It’s important that the message gets through to boys and men that we are looking to bring about a situation where there are equal opportunities for women and men. And if women are taking up the opportunities, that doesn’t mean that men are being deprived of those opportunities. The ideal situation is where you have women and men working together on activities. What we want is to tap the potential of woman entrepreneurs, to create a more level playing field so that women are not disadvantaged, and in that way they will contribute more to society and both women and men will benefit. But I think it’s a case of getting the message out that gender equality is not a “women’s issue.”

There are indeed situations where young men, or men, are disadvantaged. Often men are involved in much more dangerous, even more life-threatening work than women, and that’s something that needs to be taken into consideration and reduced or eliminated.

With a career spanning 22 years with the International Labour Organization, Finnegan has worked in Africa, Asia, South America and the ILO headquarters in Geneva. During his time in ILO, he created and managed the ILO’s programme on “Women’s Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality” (WEDGE), now operational in more than 30 countries. Since retirement in 2010, Finnegan has carried out a number of assignments for the World Bank, African Development Bank, Commonwealth Secretariat and the ILO. He has written extensively on women’s entrepreneurship development, small enterprise development, marketing and cooperatives.

Gerry Finnegan is leading the UNIDO BIT training in gender mainstreaming. To date, he has conducted one-to-one advisories and is scheduled to lead a training workshop in January 2014 for all project managers in BIT.

A special thanks to the members of the GMSC (in alphabetical order) -

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HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!!

Warm wishes from the Gender Team:

Nilgun Tas, Hedda Femundsenden, Karen Cadondon & Rebecca Spriggs

For any comments, further information or contributions, please contact: gender@unido.org