



# EVALUATION OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Synthesis Report



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This evaluation was conducted by the UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES). The evaluation team comprised Sabrina Evangelista, UN Women Regional Evaluation Specialist for Asia and the Pacific and team lead for this evaluation; Linda Wirth-Dominice, International Women's Economic Empowerment Evaluation Consultant; Arushi Pankaj Dubey, Regional Evaluation Analyst Consultant; Rajjeli Vasakula Tuivaga, National Evaluation Consultant in Fiji; and Meenal Patole, National Evaluation Consultant in India. Putri Vidya Dewi, Evaluation Consultant, provided support to NVivo analysis.

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# ACRONYMS

<b>ADB</b>	Asian Development Bank
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>BSR</b>	Business for Social Responsibility
<b>COVID-19</b>	coronavirus disease
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>DFAT</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>HBWs</b>	home-based workers
<b>HIEERA</b>	High Impact Entrepreneurs for Emerging Regions for Action
<b>ICRW</b>	International Center for Research on Women
<b>IEAS</b>	UN Women Independent Evaluation and Audit Services
<b>IES</b>	UN Women Independent Evaluation Service
<b>IFI</b>	international financial institution
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>INGO</b>	international non-governmental organization
<b>IUCN</b>	International Union for Conservation of Nature
<b>LGBTQI+</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
<b>MNE</b>	multinational enterprise
<b>MSMEs</b>	micro-, small and medium enterprises
<b>MVA</b>	market vendors association
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>ROAP</b>	UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SME</b>	small and medium-sized enterprise
<b>UNCT</b>	United Nations Country Team
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNEG</b>	United Nations Evaluation Group
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNESCAP</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WEA</b>	WeEmpowerAsia
<b>WEPs</b>	Women's Empowerment Principles



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# EVALUATION OF WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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## Introduction and background

Women’s economic empowerment is key to unlocking progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and would have a multiplier effect, not only towards achieving SDG 5 on gender equality but also SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 on reduced inequality. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth will not be achieved without realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Women’s economic participation, decision-making and leadership – in the marketplace, workplace and community – are crucial to women’s empowerment in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda recognizes that women’s empowerment and leadership in the economy are vital for enhancing economic growth and productivity.<sup>2</sup> Both agendas encourage the private sector to contribute to advancing gender equality through support to women’s full and productive employment and decent work, equal pay for work of equal value, and equal participation in entrepreneurship and innovation. However, gender norms have historically restricted women’s economic opportunities by limiting their access to information, networks, jobs and assets.

### UN Women women’s economic empowerment efforts in the Asia Pacific region<sup>3</sup> (2019–2021)

55 projects

During 2019–2021, **16 UN Women offices** implemented approximately 55 projects in the Asia and the Pacific region focused on the broader Women’s Economic Empowerment thematic area.

101M US\$ total budget

The **total committed budget** for these projects in the region was more than US\$101 million.

4 regional projects

There were 4 regional projects (WeEmpowerAsia (WEA) and 3 migration-related projects) under the outcome area on Women’s Economic Empowerment, which focused on **increasing women’s participation and leadership in business and labour migration** programmes.

26% of the total budget

The Government of Australia/ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was the **largest donor, covering 26 per cent of the total budget** for women’s economic empowerment in the region. The European Union (EU) was the second largest donor, covering 9 per cent of the total budget, with the funds focused on a single regional project: WEA.

<sup>1</sup> ADB and UN Women. 2018. Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030. Bangkok: UN Women. Available at <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/10/apsdg>  
<sup>2</sup> The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. United Nations 2015.  
<sup>3</sup> UN Women offices in the Asia and the Pacific region include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Fiji (Multi-Country Office which covers the Pacific region), India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Viet Nam. Field presences are in Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

## Evaluation purpose and intended audience

The purpose of this independent evaluation was to inform UN Women's regional strategy for Women's Economic Empowerment work based on lessons learned from the WEA programme and facilitate an understanding of UN Women's portfolio in this thematic area, including how UN Women is defining and engaging with the private sector, achievements over the course of the Strategic Note period 2019–2021, opportunities and challenges, as well as gaps in programming and results. The primary intended users of the evaluation are ROAP, including the WEA team, field offices in which WEA is being implemented, UN Women field offices with women's economic empowerment initiatives, donors such as the EU, the Government of Australia/DFAT, stakeholders and implementing partners. Other users include UN Women Senior Management and programme staff at the headquarters, regional and country levels who are interested in or working on this thematic area. The evaluation may be useful for other actors, including private sector, partner governments, civil society, United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), forums and platforms, national partners, as well as other donors.

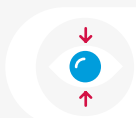
The scope focused on ROAP functions, the regional WEA programme, and the Markets for Change programme implemented in Fiji given the high programmatic investments and opportunities for learning.

The geographical scope included Asia and the Pacific, with in-depth consultations in India and Fiji. To ensure a broader understanding of regional progress, country-level women's economic empowerment efforts that have been previously evaluated were also included. The scope also considered forward-looking perspectives on UN Women's engagement in the broader Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area.

## Methodology

The evaluation employed a non-experimental, theory-based approach, utilizing mixed methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which were triangulated to maximize validity and reliability. A portfolio analysis of all women's economic empowerment efforts in the region was conducted, and a case study approach was the primary source of information for the assessment of contributions to outcomes in the selected areas. Contribution analysis was based on the theory of change reconstructed for this evaluation and captured through an evidence map. The analysis of 13 evaluations, which covered aspects related to UN Women regional efforts in this area, was also another key source of evidence. UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to analyse interview data.

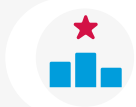
## EVALUATION QUESTIONS



**RELEVANCE:** To what extent does UN Women's support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment align with global, regional and national priorities and speak to UN Women's value added within the women's economic empowerment space?



**COHERENCE:** To what extent is UN Women's regional- and country-level support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment internally coherent with the overall efforts of UN Women and the United Nations system in this area?



**EFFECTIVENESS:** How is UN Women advancing the women's economic empowerment agenda in the Asia and the Pacific providing innovative solutions and directly benefiting women's economic empowerment through the approach of private sector engagement?



**CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY:** How did UN Women ensure regional and national ownership of private sector engagement for the women's economic empowerment agenda, and which areas of the WEA approach have the most potential for replication and scaling up?



**HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY:** How did UN Women identify and engage the most marginalized groups within the context of private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment? Are there any unintended results or contributions towards transformative change?



**ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY:** How well are UN Women's human and financial resources at regional level in Asia and the Pacific used to support efficient regional- and country-level women's economic empowerment efforts?

## Conclusions and recommendations

**CONCLUSION 1:** Women's economic empowerment is a high priority in the Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a region that is vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, which has increased vulnerability and the burden of care, decreased women's participation in the formal economy and resulted in loss of income. Stakeholders look to UN Women for expertise and leadership to drive the agenda on women's economic empowerment with its coordination mandate and gender expertise. While the ROAP focus on the formal private sector is a critical and strategic priority within the region, the broader priorities for advancing women's economic empowerment across the region need to be better reflected in ROAP's regional strategy and programmes.

**CONCLUSION 2:** UN Women has mobilized private sector actors across the Asia and the Pacific region and furthered the implementation of women's economic empowerment measures at the workplace and in the marketplace. A holistic and integrated approach to women's economic empowerment, where efforts focus on policy and action by both the public and private sectors, the identification of synergies between the informal and formal sectors, and work with partners to influence transformation towards more gender equal societies, is where efforts by UN Women have proven to be most effective, with higher potential for scale up and sustainability.

**CONCLUSION 3:** UN Women in the Asia and the Pacific region is not consistently integrating an explicit approach to identification and engagement of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, in its women's economic empowerment efforts or how partners will be engaged to support social norms change to implement this approach. Embodying the principle of leave no one behind and developing tools to support implementation can produce ripple effects towards transformative change.

**CONCLUSION 4:** Investment in governance structures and staffing that support the functions envisioned for the Regional Office with respect to supporting field offices in key thematic areas could enhance efficiency.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognizing the ongoing ROAP Strategic Note process, finalize the draft long-term regional women's economic empowerment strategy with a corresponding partnership and resource mobilization plan. The regional strategy should clearly articulate how UN Women will work with partners (particularly partners in the United Nations system) to advance women's economic empowerment. The strategy needs to reflect core UN Women values (leave no one behind) and define how informal and formal sector linkages will be supported, the roles and specific niche expertise in women's economic empowerment, and how interlinkages between thematic areas will be integrated.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

As part of the new regional women's economic empowerment strategy, codify UN Women programming models along the informal/formal private sector spectrum, emphasizing linkages between private sector engagement and policy change, establishing partnerships and facilitating exchange on available knowledge products and lessons learned to catalyse women's economic empowerment.

### RECOMMENDATION 3:

Develop an integrated approach to leaving no one behind by ensuring internal capacity to apply this lens in the programmatic cycle, engage partners that are led by or representative of marginalized groups and develop practical tools to support these efforts.

### RECOMMENDATION 4:

Invest core and other resources in building ROAP's technical capacity on Women's Economic Empowerment to fulfil its regional functions related to policy advisory, technical and capacity building support on country programming.

## OVERVIEW OF KEY DATA COLLECTED FOR THE EVALUATION

212

individuals consulted

185 females and  
27 males consulted

2

case studies

momentum building  
for private sector and  
women in marketplace  
(WEA and Markets for  
Change)

13

evaluations

reviewed in  
analysis of  
evaluations

55

projects

across Asia and the  
Pacific reviewed for  
the portfolio analysis

22

surveys

existing surveys  
reviewed



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# Introduction



## 1. Women's economic empowerment and the private sector

Women's economic empowerment is key to unlocking progress on the SDGs and would have a multiplier effect, not only towards achieving SDG 5 on gender equality but also SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 on reduced inequality. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth will not be achieved without realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women. Women's economic participation, decision-making and leadership – in the marketplace, workplace and community – are crucial to women's empowerment in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda recognizes that women's empowerment and leadership in the economy are vital

for enhancing economic growth and productivity.<sup>5</sup> Both agendas encourage the private sector to contribute to advancing gender equality through support to women's full and productive employment and decent work, equal pay for work of equal value, and equal participation in entrepreneurship and innovation. However, gender norms have historically restricted women's economic opportunities by limiting their access to information, networks, jobs and assets.

Definitions of the terms "women's economic empowerment" and "private sector" in the context of this evaluation are presented in Box 1.

### BOX 1. Foundational terminology



#### WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions.

1. To **succeed and advance economically**, women need the skills and resources to compete in markets, as well as fair and equal access to economic institutions.
2. To **have the power and agency** to benefit from economic activities, women need to have the ability to make and act on decisions and control resources and profits.

[Source: ICRW. Understanding and Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment-Definition, Framework and Indicators.]



#### PRIVATE SECTOR

This evaluation refers to the private sector as representing a broad spectrum of workers and enterprises from the informal economy (not covered under national legal and regulatory frameworks) to the formal economy (legally registered companies for fiscal and labour protection regulation purposes). Whether informal or formal, the private sector includes the following:

(see also Annex Volume 2).

For-profit and commercial enterprises of any size.

- Corporate or philanthropic foundations.
- Business associations, coalitions and alliances (e.g., chambers of commerce, employers' associations, cooperatives, industry and cross-industry initiatives where the participants are for-profit enterprises).
- State-owned enterprises.
- High net worth individuals/family offices.
- Women entrepreneurs who own a microenterprise or small- or medium-sized enterprise.

[Source: Based on the definition of "private sector" in the UN Women guidance document on use of the UN Women logo.]

<sup>4</sup> ADB and UN Women. 2018. Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030. Bangkok: UN Women. Available at <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/10/apstdg>.

<sup>5</sup> The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. United Nations. 2015.

## 2. Women's economic empowerment in the Asia and the Pacific region

Women are present throughout the business value chain in the Asia and the Pacific region as producers, business owners, executives, employees, distributors and consumers. Women own and manage approximately 30 per cent of the region's businesses, which are mainly self-employed, microenterprises or small enterprises.<sup>6</sup> It was estimated that advancing women's equality in the region could add US\$4.5 trillion to its collective annual GDP in 2025, a 12 per cent increase over the business-as-usual trajectory.<sup>7</sup> Women are making vital contributions to sustain this growth, but challenges persist. A joint report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and ROAP on gender equality and the SDGs highlights that economic gains in the region have not equally benefited women and men. Women were more represented than men in informal non-agricultural jobs in half of Asia and the Pacific. Even in formal jobs, they still earned much less than men.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, women entrepreneurs in emerging economies are some of the youngest, poorest and least educated entrepreneurs in the world and more likely to run small businesses in local markets and industry sectors that are most vulnerable to external shocks, such as the lockdowns and market shrinkage experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have likely experienced some of the worst pandemic impacts, including business closures and financial distress complicated by family demands and lack of access to financial relief.<sup>9</sup> The pandemic has reversed hard-won gains in gender equality and exacerbated the already existing inequality.

### BOX 2. Key statistics



Asia and the Pacific is the only region in which **women's participation in the labour force has been decreasing**, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been caused by the rapid transition from agriculture to manufacturing with lower-than-expected job formalization rates, and the lack of care services and infrastructure that enable women to combine work with family responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>



As of 2017, **only 14.9 per cent of corporate board members** in six Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries **were women**; 7.1 per cent were board chairs; and only one ASEAN country had legislation for women on boards.<sup>11</sup> Across Asia, **11.7 per cent of board seats were held by women**, and **5.4 per cent of board chairs were women** as of March.<sup>12</sup> However, the average Pacific regional proportion of women on boards is 22 per cent, exceeding the global average of 17 per cent.<sup>13</sup>



In South Asian countries, **women are 36 per cent less likely to use the Internet** than men.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ILO. 2018. Game changers: Women and the future of work in Asia and the Pacific. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_645601/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_645601/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>7</sup> McKinsey. 2018. The power of parity: Advancing women's equality in Asia Pacific. Accessed from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-asia-pacific>.

<sup>8</sup> ADB and UN Women. 2018. Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific - Baseline and pathways for transformative change by 2030. Accessed from: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/461211/gender-equality-sdgs-asia-pacific.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. 2022. COVID-19 impacts on Women Entrepreneurs in Emerging economies: Insights and indicators.

<sup>10</sup> ILO. 2021. Building Forward Fairer: Women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery. Accessed from: [https://www.ilo.org/gender/informationresources/Publications/WCMS\\_814499/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/gender/informationresources/Publications/WCMS_814499/lang-en/index.htm).

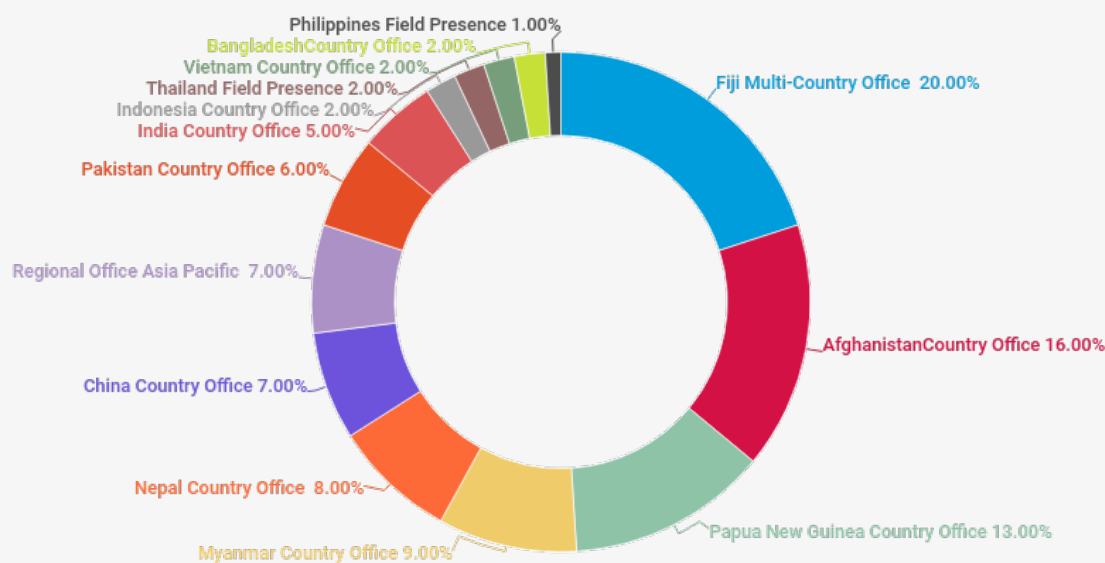
<sup>11</sup> IFC. Board Gender Diversity in ASEAN. Note: Six ASEAN countries were included in this study (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam and China). Accessed from: [https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/21f19cfe-9cce-4089-bfci-e4c38767394e/Board\\_Gender\\_Diversity\\_in\\_ASEAN.pdf?MOD=AJPERES#~:text=In%20our%20analysis%20of%20the,30%20percent%20of%20board%20membership](https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/21f19cfe-9cce-4089-bfci-e4c38767394e/Board_Gender_Diversity_in_ASEAN.pdf?MOD=AJPERES#~:text=In%20our%20analysis%20of%20the,30%20percent%20of%20board%20membership).

<sup>12</sup> Deloitte. 2021. Women in the Boardroom, The Deloitte Global Boardroom Program's Seventh Edition. Accessed from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/gx-women-in-the-boardroom-seventh-edition.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Preliminary data, collected as part of an ongoing study into Pacific women's leadership in business by the ADB Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative. Accessed from: <https://www.pacwip.org/resources/news/private-sector-progress-in-womens-leadership-in-the-pacific/>.

<sup>14</sup> ITU. 2022. Tackling the digital gender divide in Asia. Accessed from: <https://www.itu.int/hub/2022/05/digital-gender-divide-asia-unicef-rosa/>.

**FIGURE 1: Proportion of UN Women's WEE budget in Asia and the Pacific implemented between 2019-2021**



Source: Evaluation team analysis of Donor Agreement Management System and verified with Women's Economic Empowerment focal points

### 3. UN Women in Asia and the Pacific women's economic empowerment efforts

During 2019–2021, 16 UN Women offices<sup>15</sup> implemented approximately 55 projects<sup>16</sup> related to women's economic empowerment in the Asia and the Pacific region<sup>17</sup> (see Figure 1 for breakdown). The total committed budget for these projects in the region was more than US\$101 million.<sup>18</sup> Of these 55 projects, 51 were country-led, while 4 projects were regional (i.e. covering more than one country).<sup>19</sup> Fifty-one projects focused on Women's Economic Empowerment, and 4 focused on migration.<sup>20</sup> The

Government of Australia/DFAT was the largest donor, covering 26 per cent of the total budget for Women's Economic Empowerment in the region. These funds were concentrated on five projects, three of which had a start date as of 2019 and centred around building safe and equitable marketplaces for women in the Pacific region (specifically the Papua New Guinea Country Office and the Fiji Multi-Country Office).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> These 16 offices include those offices where UN Women has a physical presence and therefore does not include Republic of Korea (no presence during 2021) and Lao People's Democratic Republic (which was a former field presence).

<sup>16</sup> In addition to these 55 projects, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are implementing an initiative, the Qonsultant, a communications and license agreement for a regional television show for which no separate funding has been provided in the UN Women Donor Agreement Management System (DAMS). UN Women's primary role is to serve as a key content partner and provide technical input on content in the launch of the television show Arise.

<sup>17</sup> A portfolio analysis was undertaken with the aim of canvassing all existing efforts classified under the thematic area of Women's Economic Empowerment implemented by ROAP and Country Offices during the ROAP Strategic Note period 2019–2021. Impact Area 2, which covers economic empowerment, has been combined with outcomes on migration and climate resilience in the ROAP Strategic Note. However, for the purposes of this portfolio mapping, we have included only those migration and climate resilience projects that have women's economic empowerment components embedded in their scope of intervention. The evaluation team reviewed DAMS and reached out to ROAP and Country Office focal points to confirm the accuracy of the collected data. The information presented was not verified against Atlas financial system of UN Women and thus the actual budget may differ. Nevertheless, this mapping was helpful in providing an overview. To ensure all women's economic empowerment projects implemented during 2019–2021 were covered, the mapping includes both projects that were initiated before 2019, but for which the implementation period was overlapping with the ROAP Strategic Note period (2019–2021) and projects that were initiated during or after 2019 (see Annex 9).

<sup>18</sup> Source of information is committed budget specified in the Project Document or Donor Agreement.

<sup>19</sup> These projects include two projects focused on women's economic empowerment (WeEmpowerAsia and Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in a Digital World) and two projects on migration (Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand (PROMISE) and Regional Programme on Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Asia).

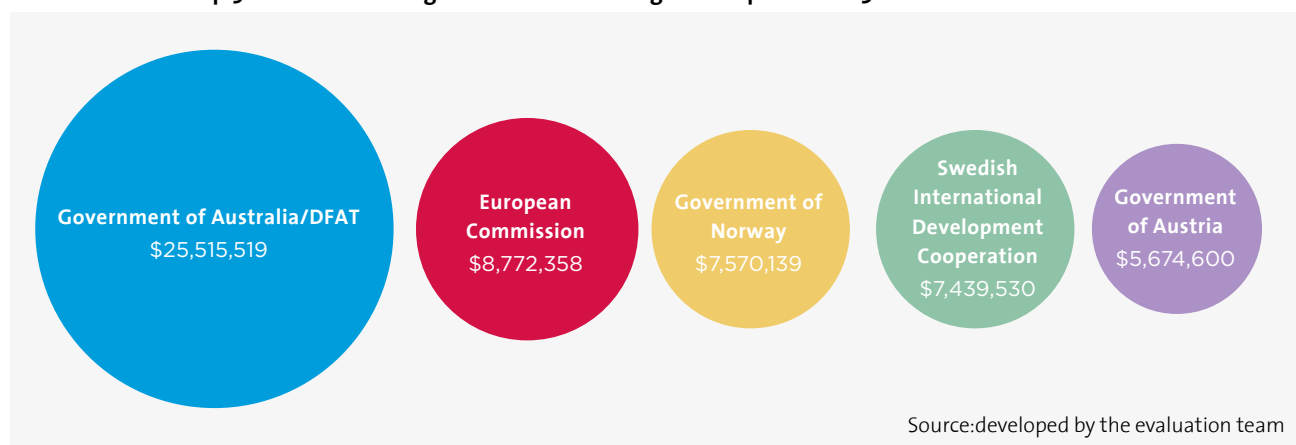
<sup>20</sup> Several of the migration projects also cover aspects of women's economic empowerment such as livelihoods and skill training for migrants.

<sup>21</sup> The other two projects are the regional project Preventing the Exploitation of Migrant Women Workers in the ASEAN, implemented across seven countries in the region, and the Survivors Economic Empowerment Journey project, implemented in Afghanistan. The Markets for Change project funded by the Government of Australia has moved into Phase II (US\$3.8 million) as of January 2022 and expanded in Samoa, but it has not been included here, as this portfolio analysis covers the ROAP Strategic Note period 2019–2021.

The EU is the second largest donor, covering 9 per cent of the total budget for Women's Economic Empowerment in the region, with the funds focused on a single regional project: WeEmpowerAsia (WEA) (see Annex 9 and infographic below). During the Strategic Note period 2019–2021, ROAP had a dedicated outcome on Women's Economic Empowerment, which focused on increasing women's participation and leadership in business and labour migration programmes (see infographic on UN Women's Women's Economic Empowerment Portfolio in the Asia and the Pacific Region on page 16).

There were four regional projects under this outcome area: WEA and three migration-related projects. The ROAP team under the Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area included one Regional Programme Specialist (P4, FTA), one Programme Associate (SC7) and consultants providing technical, communications and monitoring and evaluation support funded by the WEA programme during the period of evaluation (refer to annex 9.3).

#### INFOGRAPHIC: Top 5 donors in the region for ROAP Strategic Note period 2019–2021



## 4. Evaluation purpose, objectives, scope and methodology

The UN Women Evaluation Policy<sup>22</sup> and the UN Women Evaluation Handbook<sup>23</sup> are the main guiding documents that set forth the principles and organizational framework for evaluation planning, conduct and follow-up in UN Women. These principles are aligned with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation<sup>24</sup> and Ethical Guidelines.<sup>25</sup>

### Purpose

The purpose of this independent evaluation was to inform the regional strategy for Women's Economic Empowerment work based on lessons learned from the WEA programme and country-level efforts including the Markets for Change project, and to facilitate an understanding of UN Women's portfolio in this thematic area, including how UN Women is defining and engaging with the private sector, achievements over the course of the Strategic Note period 2019–2021, opportunities, challenges as well as gaps in programming and results.

The primary intended users of the evaluation are the UN Women ROAP, including the WEA team; field offices in which WEA is being implemented; UN Women field offices with women's economic empowerment initiatives; donors such as the EU, the Government of Australia/DFAT; stakeholders and implementing partners. Also, UN Women Senior Management and programme staff at the headquarters, regional and country levels with an interest in, or working in women's economic empowerment may be interested in using the report. The evaluation may be useful for other actors working in this area, including private sector, partner governments, civil society, United Nations agencies, International Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, forums and platforms, national partners, as well as other donors.

<sup>22</sup> UN Women Revised Evaluation Policy, UNW/2020/5/Rev.2; available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/executive%20board/2020/second%20regular%20session/unw-2020-5-rev2%20revised%20eval%20policy%20for%20endorsement%20at%20srs%202020%203%20sept%20rev.pdf?la=en&vs=3925>.

<sup>23</sup> UN Women Evaluation Handbook, 2022. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/un-women-evaluation-handbook-2022>.

<sup>24</sup> UNEG, Norms and Standards for Evaluation, 2016. Available at: <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>.

<sup>25</sup> UNEG, Ethical Guidelines, 2008. Available at: <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/102>.

## Evaluation objectives

The objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. Assess the relevance and coherence, effectiveness and organizational efficiency, and sustainability of UN Women's engagement with the private sector for women's economic empowerment (e.g. WEA) and the extent to which project efforts are working coherently with the priorities and needs related to efforts led by Country Offices and in synergy with the United Nations system.
2. Analyse how the human rights approach and gender equality principles are integrated in the work of UN Women's engagement with the private sector for women's economic empowerment.
3. Identify a menu of evidence of what works in terms of engaging the private sector to catalyse women's economic empowerment to understand the cost of invested resources to achieve the intended outcomes with the aim of providing input to investments by Country Offices in this area for future programmatic work.
4. Identify lessons learned and provide action-oriented recommendations to inform UN Women's work in this area.

## Scope

ROAP efforts in the area of Women's Economic Empowerment are captured under the ROAP Strategic Note 2019–2021. Outcomes 2.1 and 2.2 are aligned with the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 (Impact Area 2 and Outcome 4) and the UN Women Strategic Plan 2018–2021 (Outcome 3 and Outputs 8, 9 and 10) and were the focus of this evaluation. The scope focused on ROAP functions, the WEA programme and the Markets for Change programme implemented in Fiji given the high programmatic investments and opportunities for learning (refer to infographic on evaluation case studies on page 18). The geographical scope includes Asia and the Pacific, with in-depth consultations in India and Fiji. To ensure a broader understanding of progress towards women's economic empowerment in the region, country-level efforts that have been previously evaluated were also included. The scope also considered forward-looking perspectives on UN Women's engagement in the broader Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area. As ROAP's migration programmes fall under Women's Economic Empowerment in the Strategic Note, they were included in the overall portfolio analysis (refer to footnote 14).

However, they were not included in the scope of the evaluation because they are understood by ROAP personnel as conceptually distinct. UN Women's integrated mandate (normative, coordination and operational) was covered as a fundamental aspect of the evaluation. UN Women adheres to the "leave no one behind" principle; therefore, the evaluation considered how efforts are affecting groups differently (across disability status, race, ethnicity and other dimensions) and ensured an inclusive approach, including by inviting representatives of organizations representing marginalized people to participate.

## Methodology

UN Women adheres to the UN Women Evaluation Policy and Handbook, which is in line with the UNEG Norms and Standards. UN Women evaluations are gender-responsive, meaning they are participatory, transparent and analyse the underlying barriers and social norms that inhibit progress on realizing women's rights. A gender perspective was integrated in the evaluation questions, analysis and findings, conclusions and recommendations. The evaluation employed a non-experimental, theory-based approach, utilizing mixed methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which were triangulated to maximize validity and reliability. A case study approach was the primary source of information for the assessment of contributions to outcomes in the selected areas. To the extent possible, outcome mapping<sup>26</sup> through consultations with beneficiaries contributed to a bottom-up understanding of the key contributions of programmatic efforts. Contribution analysis<sup>27</sup> was based on the theory of change reconstructed for this evaluation (refer to infographic on Regional Women's Economic Empowerment efforts and reconstructed theory of change) and captured through an evidence map.<sup>28</sup> The analysis of 13 evaluations, which covered aspects related to UN Women's regional efforts in the area of Women's Economic Empowerment, was another key source of evidence. IES used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to analyse interview data. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to complicate in-person data collection during the evaluation period. However, field data collection was led by the national consultant in Fiji. The case studies also reached rights holders/beneficiaries of UN Women efforts through online means. The evaluation matrix is presented in Annex 4. A snapshot of the evidence map is presented in Annex 8. Data collection tools are presented in Annex 5.

<sup>26</sup> Outcome mapping, Earl, Carden, Smutylo, Outcome mapping: building learning and reflection into development programs; International Development Research Centre. 2001. [https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/OM\\_English\\_final.pdf](https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/OM_English_final.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Contribution analysis recognizes that attribution is not possible in complex environments such as real life. Based on: Mayne, J. (2011). Addressing Cause and Effect in Simple and Complex Settings through Contribution Analysis. In Evaluating the Complex, R. Schwartz, K. Forss, and M. Marra (Eds.), Transaction Publishers.

<sup>28</sup> The evidence map is a matrix to map information obtained from the multiple sources of data on the same evaluation question, including UN Women reports (annual report, donor reports), information collected through interviews, analysis of evaluations and case studies.

## Data collection methods

An overview of the data collected is presented in the infographic on page 6. The team conducted an analysis of the Women's Economic Empowerment portfolio in the Asia and the Pacific region and an analysis of 13 evaluations relevant to this area. No surveys were administered by the evaluation team, given that 30 surveys were already undertaken as part of the WEA programme and one was ongoing during the evaluation. Two surveys were also undertaken by AKVO Fiji in response to tropical cyclone Yasa (January 2021) and Ana (March 2021) as part of the Markets for Change programme. The team also referred to the ROAP surveys of UN Women personnel<sup>29</sup> and external partners<sup>30</sup> shared in 2021 as input to the midterm review of the Strategic Note. Given the potential for survey fatigue, the evaluation team reviewed the existing surveys for their usability and, where applicable, referenced the results. Additionally, as outlined in the infographic on page 17 and 18 on regional Women's Economic Empowerment overview and case studies, two programmes, WEA and Markets for Change, were selected for in-depth case studies, interviews and focus group discussions. In total, 212 stakeholders were consulted, of which 86 per cent (N=182/212) were female and 14 per cent (N=30/212) were male.

Data collection was driven by the evaluation questions and selected with the aim of providing the most useful information possible to the ROAP and case study countries.

Two case study reports (see Annexes Volume 2) were prepared with a view to providing useful information on women's economic empowerment from the perspective of both the formal and informal sectors. The first case study focused on the momentum building around WEPs in the private sector through the WEA programme.

The second case study focused on models for scaling up approaches for women in the marketplace from both the formal (WEA programme) and informal (Markets for Change, Fiji) sectors by applying a systematic capacity-building assessment framework (see infographic on page 17 and 18 on regional Women's Economic Empowerment overview and case studies). The synthesis report has identified trends, good practices and lessons learned that are applicable to Country Offices across the region based on the different sources of data collected.

## Limitations

The evaluation team identified the following key methodological limitations and process constraints:

1. Short time frame for data collection; in-person data collection limited to Fiji as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions.
2. Attribution versus contribution: it is not possible to undertake a quasi-experimental approach that could give higher confidence to enable attribution.
3. Measurement and sampling bias: given the large universe of actors engaged by UN Women in the private sector, the results cannot be generalized. However, they do provide key insights.
4. Evaluation team knowledge of local language was limited to the two national consultants in Fiji and India.

To mitigate bias, the evaluation employed multiple methods of data collection from diverse sources (interviews, observations, existing evaluations and WEA surveys, and leveraging existing secondary data) to ensure validity and reliability of data, which were triangulated through the evidence map.

<sup>29</sup> Thirteen of the 16 UN Women offices covered by ROAP participated in this survey.

<sup>30</sup> The partner sample was comprised of civil society organizations and/or non-governmental organizations or United Nations entities. The response rate was 37 per cent (N=38/102).

**INFOGRAPHIC: Data collected for the evaluation**

**Evaluation approach**

The evaluation employed a gender-responsive, non-experimental theory-based approach, utilizing mixed methods to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which were triangulated to maximize validity and reliability.

**Data collection from different data sources**

- 1 Desk review: analysis of more than 100 documents
- 2 Individuals consulted including both internal and external stakeholders
- 3 Women’s Economic Empowerment portfolio analysis and WEPs journey timeline
- 4 Focus group discussions and review of existing surveys
- 5 Analysis of 13 evaluations

**104 market vendors consulted**



including **7 focus group discussions across 6 markets**. This includes 17 vendors who were also part of **the market management**. Market observation tool used for 4 markets. One interview each was conducted with a government stakeholder, implementing partner and member of a town council.

**100+ documents analysed**



including **analysis of 13 evaluations**, publications / **social media review** and different **systems reviewed** (OneApp Dashboard, Donor Agreement Management System, Results Management System and ATLAS)

**2 virtual case studies**

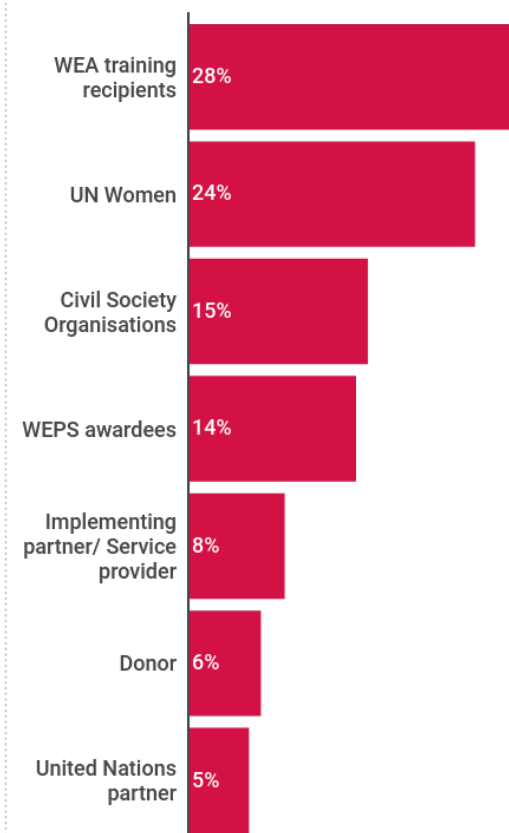


Looking at **strategies that engage companies** and build an enabling environment for women’s economic empowerment in the private sector (**WEPs Awards**, knowledge products/events)



Analyzing **models** that could be upscaled or replicated from both **informal and formal sectors** (such as **Markets for Change**, WEPs capacity-building, Industry Disruptor, WeRise and Care Accelerator)

**Individuals consulted**



**212**  
individuals consulted

107 Markets for Change +105 other WEA/Women’s Economic Empowerment

**2**  
virtual case studies

– both with in-person data collection

**13**  
focus group discussions

7 Markets for Change + 6 others as part of Women’s Economic Empowerment/ WEA

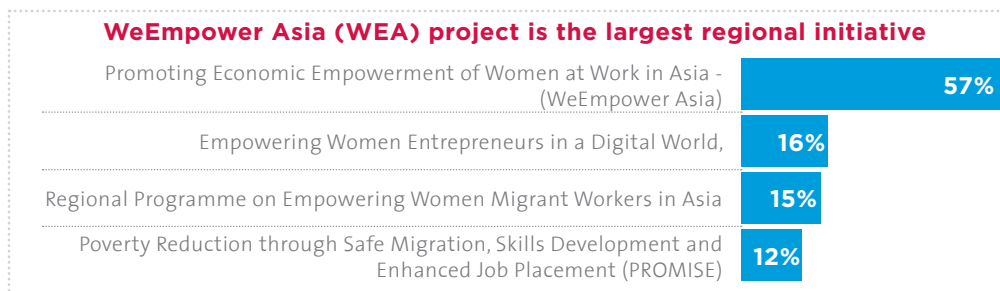
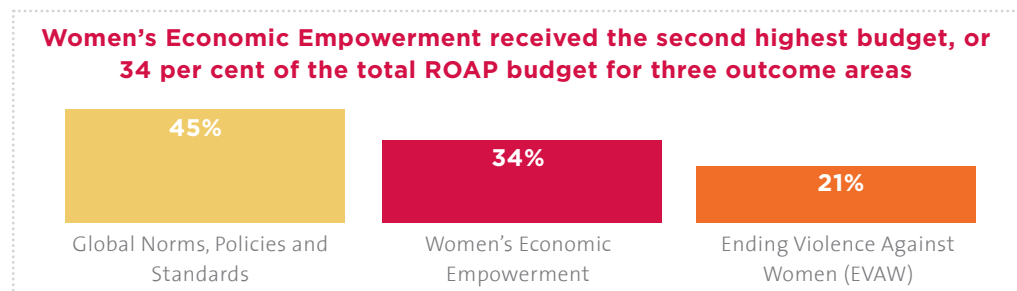
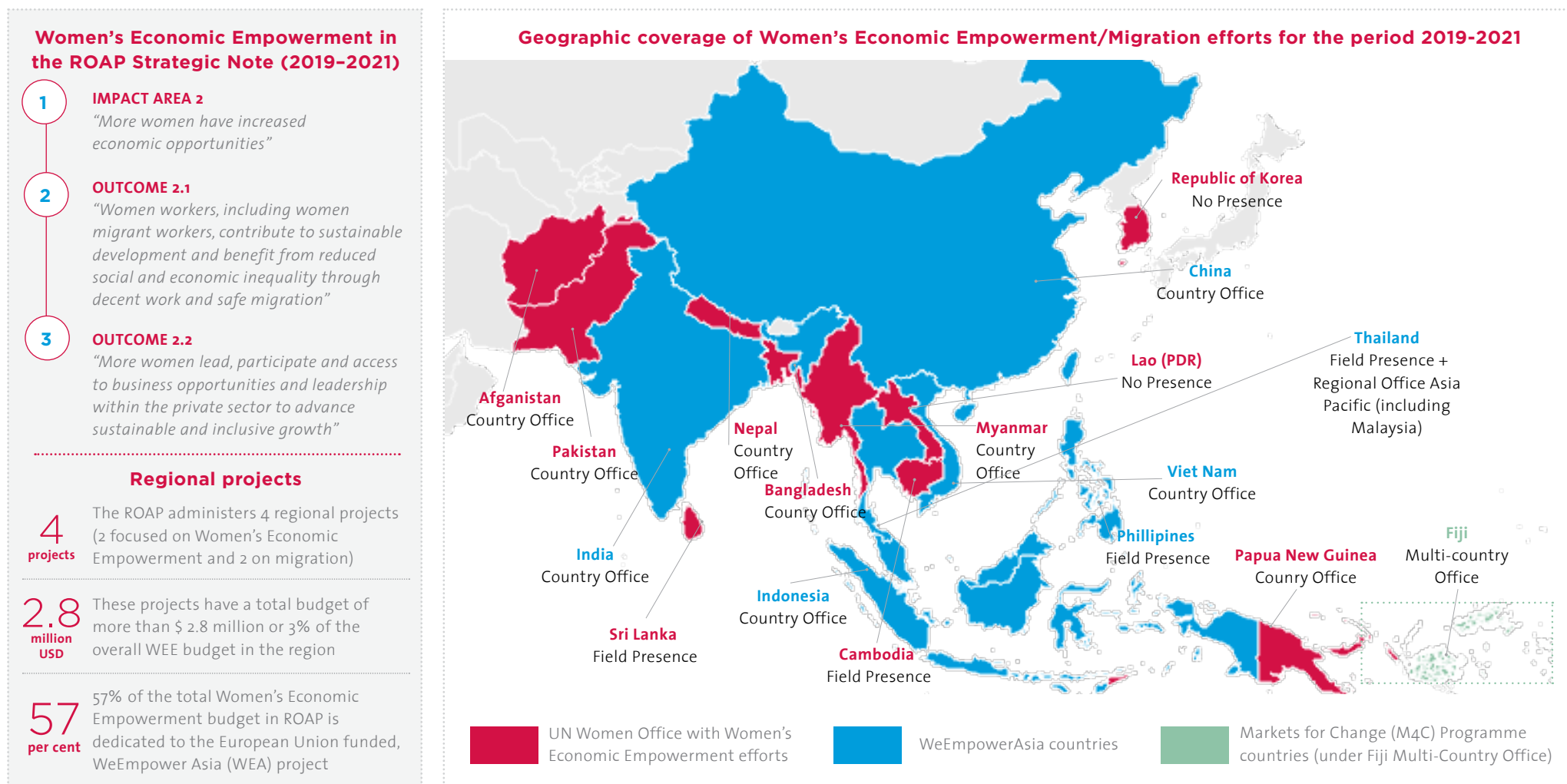
**55**  
projects

across Asia and the Pacific reviewed for the portfolio analysis

**22**  
existing surveys reviewed

18 WEA surveys, 2 Markets for Change surveys and 2 surveys conducted by the ROAP for the mid-term review of the Strategic Note

**INFOGRAPHIC: UN Women’s Women’s Economic Empowerment Portfolio in the Asia and the Pacific Region**



Source: Developed by the evaluation team



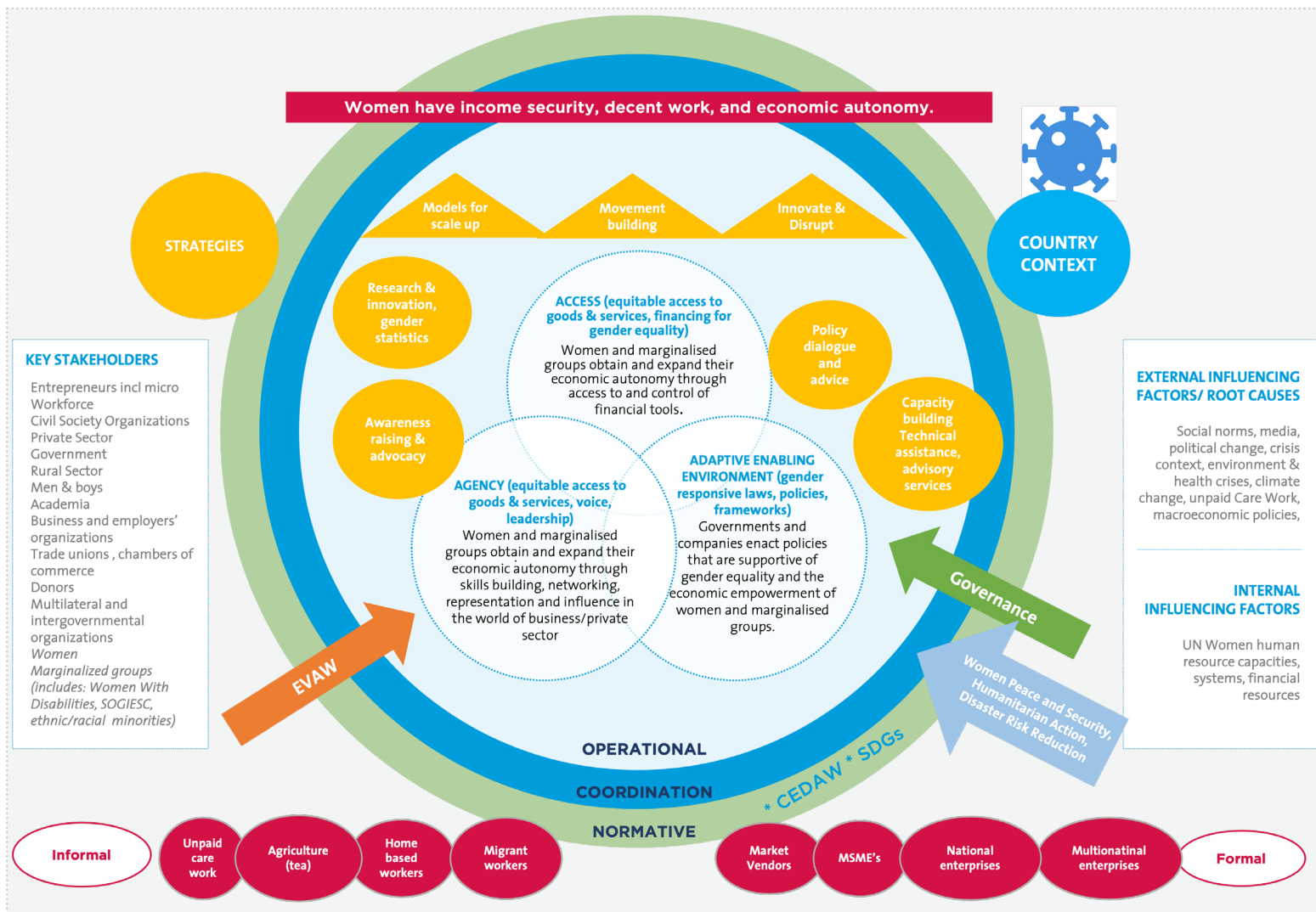
**INFOGRAPHIC: UN Women in Asia and the Pacific’s Women’s Economic Empowerment efforts and reconstructed theory of change**

**Reconstructed theory of change: UN Women’s Contribution to Women’s Economic Empowerment through Private Sector Engagement**

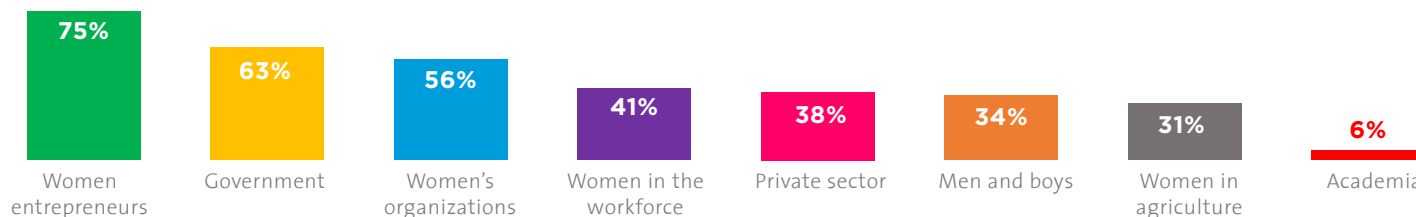
While relevant aspects of the previous global theory of change (2018–2021) are considered, this reconstructed version is cognizant of emerging interventions strategic to women’s economic empowerment, such as addressing unpaid work and the promotion of investment in growing the care economy, gender-responsive procurement and gender-responsive climate change adaptation. The theory of change is inspired by the framework for women’s economic empowerment put forth by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

**Regional level:** WEA is the focus of women’s economic empowerment efforts. It engages the formal private sector (women entrepreneurs, companies, etc.) to advance sustainable and inclusive growth by having more women lead and participate in businesses.

**Country level:** Efforts include engaging primarily with the informal sector: market vendors, home-based workers, women in agriculture, migrant women and women affected by crisis to access skills, resources and training. Some countries also aimed to influence gender-responsive laws, policies and frameworks on women’s economic empowerment.



**Percentage of project funds dedicated to different target groups on women’s economic empowerment in the region**



## INFOGRAPHIC: Evaluation case studies - Private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment in the workplace and marketplace

## WeEmpowerAsia

**FUNDED BY**

European Union

**Geographic coverage:** China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam**BUDGET AND TIMEFRAME****US\$8.4 million**

April 2019 to August 2022

**TARGET GROUPS**

Women entrepreneurs | Women in the workforce (formal) | Private sector companies | Women's networks/ organizations/business associations | Government and policymakers

**KEY STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION****Implementation of the four "Big Rocks":** the WEPs Activator, the Entrepreneurship Accelerator, the Industry Disruptor and the Movement Creator, to build capacity of women entrepreneurs and private companies and to create an enabling environment for women's economic empowerment. The evaluation takes a closer look at the following key initiatives under WEA:

- **Care accelerator:** Provided capacity building support to women-owned care enterprises, to help advance their businesses and identify ways of catalysing private and public investments. The start-ups came from seven countries - Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore and Thailand.
- **Industry Disruptor:** Incubation and mentorship initiative to provide women owned SMEs in India with the opportunity to learn from top industry players.
- **Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs):** Mobilized companies across the Asia Pacific region on WEPs through various WEPs related components (such as awards and other events, advocacy through knowledge products and social media engagement and capacity building and training to companies on WEPs).
- **WEPs activator:** Provided companies with interactive training sessions, peer learning, and individual mentoring to advance WEPs; implemented in Malaysia with similar models in China, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.
- **WeRise:** Provided capacity-building training and toolkits for entrepreneurs and accelerators to build a more gender-inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem; implemented in Indonesia and Thailand.



## Markets for Change

**FUNDED BY**

Government of Australia through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Government of Canada through the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development and the Government of New Zealand through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade

**BUDGET AND TIMEFRAME****US\$22.3 million**

April 2014 – March 2021 (Phase 1)

**TARGET GROUPS**

Women market vendors and women in agriculture (Informal) | Governance structures in marketplaces | Government departments and municipalities

**KEY STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Expanding economic opportunities for women market vendors through capacity-building, ensuring that local governments and market management are gender responsive and representative, and that physical infrastructure is improved to make markets safer and more accessible.

*Although phase 1 of the project was implemented in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, this case study looks at Markets for Change in Fiji**Phase two has been approved and has commenced in 2022.*



Photo ©UN Women/Satu Bumi Jaya

# Findings

Please refer to the infographics above that explain the initiatives that were looked at in-depth as part of the evaluation case studies and which inform the key findings presented.

## RELEVANCE

To what extent does UN Women's support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment align with global, regional and national priorities and speak to UN Women's value added within the women's economic empowerment space?

## FINDING 1

**Women's Economic Empowerment is a highly relevant area of work in the Asia Pacific region that requires intensification and scaling up of efforts, particularly in the post COVID-19 pandemic context. UN Women has proven itself to be adaptive and responsive to the COVID-19 pandemic context in the region.**

Women's economic empowerment is a key means for achieving gender equality and the SDGs. Setbacks related to the COVID-19 pandemic have only magnified the relevance of and need to intensify and scale up efforts in this area. Women were more exposed and vulnerable to labour market disruptions and bore the burden of the pandemic as a result of more intense unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>31</sup> As noted above, Asia and the Pacific is the only region in which women's participation in the labour force is falling.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing the continued priority, the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025 identifies Women's Economic Empowerment as one of the four thematic impact areas that will drive progress, with the aim of ensuring that women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy. This is also aligned with the SDGs (5, 8 and others) and other international agreements that highlight the critical role of women in the economy for overall progress.

The analysis of evaluations and consultations and desk review identified that UN Women adjusted priorities to major contextual changes, demonstrating flexibility in adapting its approaches to shifting local situations and the COVID-19 pandemic, which facilitated progress for women's economic empowerment.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Women in the region immediately reached out to partners to collect data on the situation they were experiencing and understand what was needed to support continued efforts towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. Out of the 29 advocacy briefs/research publications produced under the regional (Asia Pacific) WEA programme, 11 were exclusively focused on COVID-19 impact, response or recovery in the private sector. COVID-19 knowledge products, such as research,<sup>33</sup> guidance notes<sup>34</sup> (for companies and to support women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)) and an assessment tool,<sup>35</sup> were developed to influence a more gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery. In collaboration with Investing in Women, WEA also conducted large-scale surveys on the effects of COVID-19 on the private sector in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam to strengthen UN Women's support towards the private sector to build back better in a more gender-inclusive way. Publications led by the regional Gender Statistics team Women Count programme, including [Supporting the recovery of women entrepreneurs from COVID-19 impact in Bangladesh](#)<sup>36</sup> and the time-use survey and analysis assessing unpaid care and domestic work in Afghanistan, were important contributions to addressing the data gap on the impact of COVID-19 on women's economic empowerment in the region.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> UN Women. December 2021. <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/glaring-gaps-response-RGA.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> ILO. 2019. Global Wage Report 2018/2019: What Lies Behind Gender Pay Gaps. Accessed from: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_650553.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_650553.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> For example, Private Sector Pulse Check – The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women and Businesses: A Survey of 65 CEOs and Business Leaders in Asia and Europe. Available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/private-sector-pulse-check--the-effects-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-women-and-businesses>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/women-poverty-economics/weempowerasia/wea-resources>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/covid-19-and-gender-rapid-self-assessment-tool#:~:text=Building%20on%20the%20seven%20Women's,measures%20throughout%20their%20value%20chain.>

<sup>36</sup> <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/04/supporting-the-recovery-of-women-entrepreneurs---bangladesh>.

<sup>37</sup> UN Women. 2021. The Telling Nature of Time: What time-use reveals about gender equality in Afghanistan. Accessed from: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-in-afghanistan>; <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/05/the-telling-nature-of-time>.

UN Women also moved efforts online, e.g., training such as SheCan, which was part of the Women's Access to Equal Employment and Leadership Programme (2017–2020) in China. The Viet Nam Country Office was involved in funding proposals to include efforts aimed at reaching marginalized populations with cash to sustain livelihoods. The Pakistan home-based workers programme provided digital literacy training to a group of women to support them to move their businesses online. The Nepal Country Office developed a comprehensive COVID-19 relief package aimed at supporting women and the most vulnerable people to bounce back from shock and take self-directed steps to resilience and recovery. The package provided a mix of services, essential items and cash support to 6,736 women from excluded groups as reported by the Country Office (see the forthcoming Country Portfolio Evaluation of UN Women Nepal for more information).

The regional WEA programme also rapidly adjusted to the new digital reality and organized events, webinars and exchanges online, e.g., the WEPs Awards ceremonies at regional and country level, the #WomenRiseAboveCovid discussion series in the Philippines, and webinars with SMEs, representatives of women's organizations and companies in India and the Philippines. Training with entrepreneurs through the Care Accelerator, WeRise and the Industry Disruptor were also moved online. The Markets for Change programme reported<sup>38</sup> adapted programming by engaging market vendor associations (MVAs) in the production of reusable face masks for the market vendors and Municipal Council market staff as a means to provide them with an alternate livelihood option and supported markets with adapting to health protocols, allowing markets to remain open as essential service providers. Furthermore, Markets for Change piloted digital platforms for training during COVID-19.

## FINDING 2

**The Regional Office has made progress defining an approach with the formal private sector, that is highly relevant in Asia and the Pacific. However, a broadening of the scope will be necessary to capture country- and regional-level priorities and efforts within the broad women's economic empowerment space and to ensure that UN Women's value added across its triple mandate is fully leveraged.**

UN Women's integrated triple mandate (normative, operational and UN system coordination) serves as the fundamental framework for the reconstructed theory of change (see infographic on page 16 and 18 on regional Women's Economic Empowerment efforts and reconstructed theory of change). UN Women in Asia and the Pacific has engaged across its triple mandate to advance women's economic empowerment.

**The regional WEA programme spanning seven countries provided a key entry point to test innovative approaches to working with the private sector and helped to move towards a regional blueprint for advancing women's participation and leadership by working with the private sector.**

UN Women engagement on women's economic empowerment through formal private sector engagement in Asia and the Pacific is relatively recent. For example, the EU-funded WEA programme began in 2019.

The EU funded a Programme Specialist to manage the WEA programme, which focused ROAP efforts towards the formal private sector. However, ROAP lacked a Regional Thematic Adviser who could work beyond the WEA programme, which limited the scope of action in the thematic area of Women's Economic Empowerment at regional level.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, amongst others, calls upon the private sector to take strategic action on women's economic empowerment.<sup>39</sup> Given that the private sector is now driving growth in many countries in the region (e.g. China, India, Indonesia, Viet Nam), focusing on the private sector is a relevant strategy and recognition of its importance in driving economies, job creation and influence in the normative space – both political and social. Engagement of the formal private sector is an important avenue for influencing social norms change through corporate-level leadership, with the potential to have ripple effects across society.

<sup>38</sup> UN Women, Fiji Multi-Country Office. Annual report 2020.

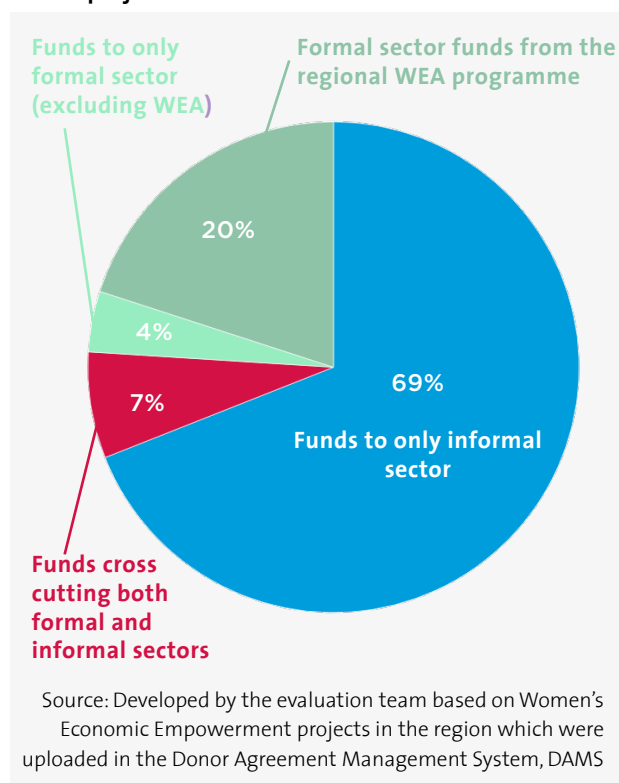
<sup>39</sup> Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, page 16. Accessed from: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>.

This also includes systemic change in the private sector by institutionalizing gender-responsive business conduct, such as by increasing accountability mechanisms for WEPs. It represents a positive step towards bringing UN Women's normative mandate to the world of business with a view to strengthening an enabling environment for gender equality and the empowerment of women. It also creates opportunities for synergies with UN Women's key networks of civil society organizations and women/gender national machineries in the advancement of women's economic empowerment. Furthermore, 93 per cent (N=103/111) of respondents to the EU Foreign Policy Instrument survey<sup>40</sup> felt (either fairly or significantly) that the WEA programme has provided technical support and/or innovative approaches that have helped their enterprise and/or themselves to grow. Based on the stakeholders consulted and social media analytics (see Figure 6), the regional WEA programme helped ROAP and participating countries build credibility with the private sector, test new approaches and further a blueprint for engagement with the formal private sector.

**The ROAP focus on the formal private sector through WEA (see the infographic under the introduction) has been critical and strategic within the Asia and the Pacific region for furthering formal private sector work, but there are broader priorities across the region for advancing women's economic empowerment.**

Figure 2 identifies non-core resources dedicated by UN Women Country Offices and ROAP projects during 2018-2021 to the formal and the informal economic sectors (implemented as of 2019). Sixty-nine per cent of the total funds of UN Women for women's economic empowerment were directed towards the informal sector. Twenty-four per cent of the funds exclusively targeted the formal sector, with 20 per cent of these funds coming from the WEA programme. Country-level efforts outside of WEA largely focused on building capacity of informal sector actors: women in agriculture, home-based workers, market vendors, women migrants, social protection and recovery responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting economic and climate change resilience, digital literacy for women-led micro-, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and building linkages between these efforts and policy-level action.

**FIGURE 2: Overview of non-core sector-wide funds (formal versus informal economic sector) dedicated by UN Women Country Offices and the RO in Asia and the Pacific projects between 2018-2021.**



Stakeholders consulted across stakeholder types in the region (UN Women, United Nations, donors, private sector) look to UN Women for leadership and driving the broader women's economic empowerment agenda, pointing to: (a) its credibility as the entity focused on women's empowerment and gender equality, (b) its convening power (ability to link across the market value chain and government), (c) its potential for influencing the normative agenda and (d) its gender expertise in research, data and advocacy on women economic empowerment. However, stakeholders pointed to the need to establish a regional vision that broadened the scope beyond formal private sector engagement based on regional and country-level priorities and needs. The evaluation team consulted with UN Women focal points on Women's Economic Empowerment from 13 offices across the region, including the Regional Office.<sup>41</sup> Of these, personnel from nine field offices expressed a need for greater partnership with the government in this area and greater engagement at the macro-economic and policy level. Five of these field offices particularly expressed that support, leadership and guidance is needed from ROAP on engagement in policy dialogue.

<sup>40</sup> The EU FPI evaluation conducted an Enterprises perception survey with WEPs signatories and allies. The response rate of this survey was 15.7 per cent (N=111/708)

<sup>41</sup> In total, 25 UN Women personnel from the Asia Pacific region participated in group or individual interviews.

Two surveys were conducted by ROAP with UN Women personnel and external partners to inform the midterm review of the ROAP Strategic Note in early 2021, and they are consistent with the evaluation findings.<sup>42</sup> The 2021 ROAP survey results with UN Women personnel showed that respondents were, overall, least satisfied with ROAP services provided in the thematic areas of Women's Economic Empowerment and Climate Change.<sup>43</sup>

Within the Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area, 36 per cent (N=4/11) of offices responded that services in this area related to policy analysis, advice and recommendations were not effective, while 45 per cent (N=5/11) said that they were only somewhat effective. The 2021 ROAP survey of external partners indicated that in general (47 per cent, N=18/38) believe that ROAP should provide more policy analysis, advice and recommendations moving forward.

## Towards a regional strategy for women's economic empowerment

During the drafting of this evaluation report, ROAP was developing a regional strategy as part of the new regional Strategic Note, which was informed by a survey of 21 UN Women focal points for women's economic empowerment in the region and group consultations. The draft strategy provides a comprehensive summary and substantive analysis of issues related to women's economic empowerment, and the Executive Summary identifies three main sub-thematic areas for attention: transforming the care economy, decent work and women in business, and women's entrepreneurship.<sup>44</sup> The draft strategy also refers to UN Women's convening and normative roles in pursuing policy changes. However, still to be elaborated in the strategy is how the broader macroeconomic priorities will be reflected and acted upon and the precise nature of UN Women's contribution to these three areas, as well as how the organization will work with other partners that are more significantly present in these spaces. A results framework is still to be included and could help clarify the role of UN Women.

The regional WEA team has also been working on resource mobilization proposals (see Annex 9.5) that identify two areas where UN Women could strengthen its focus: the care economy and gender-responsive procurement. Some external development partners and UN Women personnel consulted believe that UN Women has identified a potential niche and could build on the momentum created during the COVID-19 pandemic, when these issues were highlighted. However, this may require more expertise and partnerships with a focus on UN Women's value added in the normative and policy space and identifying partners to collaborate with on direct interventions with beneficiary target groups (rather than implementing alone) that provide more potential scale and sustainability. UN Women personnel and United Nations system partners consulted noted that UN Women should also continue building on areas where it has established expertise, such as gender-responsive budgeting and gender data that could inform gender-responsive economic action. Other emerging areas could be explored, such as synergies with the ROAP climate change and disaster risk reduction and resilience programme EmPower and the green economy.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The surveys were conducted between February and March, 2021. Thirteen out of 16 UN Women offices in the region participated in the internal UN Women personnel survey. The external survey (UN Women partners from civil society organizations, NGOs and other United Nations agencies) had a response rate of 37 per cent (N=38/102).

<sup>43</sup> Thirty-six per cent of respondents said ROAP services on Women's Economic Empowerment were not effective, and 27 per cent said these services were only somewhat effective.

<sup>44</sup> The draft Women's Economic Empowerment strategy of the Regional Office also notes, "Subsequently, from a partner, country office and national government level, we can confidently express that the recommended areas of focus for the WEE SN 2022-2025 should be: Decent work and social protection in formal and informal economies, increasing women's ownership and management of small, medium, and large enterprises, and promoting gender-transformative economies action." However, the emphasis is placed on the defined sub-thematic areas, which are mentioned several places and thus noted here.

<sup>45</sup> UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific has implemented the Empower joint programme with UNEP since 2019. It is funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and includes work on models for renewable energy at community level and aligning these with policy change. More information can be found in the forthcoming evaluation of Empower.

**COHERENCE**

To what extent is UN Women's regional- and country-level support to private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment internally coherent with the overall efforts of UN Women and the United Nations system in this area?

**FINDING 3**

**Broader women's economic empowerment efforts at country and regional level in the Asia and the Pacific are often disparate and not fully reflective of a broader corporate or regional vision for women's economic empowerment, limiting overall internal coherence.**

**Corporate coherence**

The Women's Economic Empowerment outcome area of the UN Women corporate Strategic Plan 2018–2021 focused on UN Women's role in promoting policies on decent work and social protection for women and strengthening capacity of women entrepreneurs as well as rural women to ensure women's rights to economic equality and opportunities. While the ROAP Strategic Note aligns with the corporate Strategic Plan (Figure 3), there was a gap at regional level on support provided to the promotion of policies on decent work and social protection for women (Output 8 of the corporate Strategic Plan). While some work has focused on women migrant workers,<sup>46</sup> it has been reported that although contributions to progress have been made, there were no additional legal, regulatory and/or policy frameworks related to decent work that were supported by UN Women in the region.<sup>47</sup>

UN Women stakeholders consulted noted that while there has been some interaction with headquarters during the process of developing the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 to articulate the theory of change, overall, there was limited guidance and support provided to the field on women's economic empowerment beyond that received by WEA. This situation may have been affected by a lengthy process to fill the headquarters position of Women's Economic Empowerment Chief in the UN Women's Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division (PPID).

**FIGURE 3: Women's economic empowerment related outputs/outcomes in the Corporate Strategic Plan (2018–2021) and the ROAP Strategic Note (2019–2021).**



<sup>46</sup> Despite no policy being developed in 2021, UN Women led interventions that increased the commitment of Member States to further implement policies to ensure the rights of women migrant workers are protected and advanced. For example, UN Women supported the organization of the 14th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML), assisted in the organization of meetings of the Colombo Process Thematic Area Working Groups (TAWGs) and provided technical input to the Executive Committee of the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>47</sup> UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. Annual report 2021.



**Regional coherence: Broader women’s economic empowerment efforts were not guided by a coherent and targeted UN Women regional strategy, limiting the overall potential for coherence between country and regional efforts (as noted under Finding 2).**

There was limited conceptual coherence between regional-level women’s economic empowerment efforts (WEA and migration) and country-level efforts beyond those efforts that were part of the respective regional programmes. Although migration was administratively placed under the Women’s Economic Empowerment area, there was room for better leveraging conceptual linkages and synergies between projects at the planning stage. As the portfolio analysis completed for this evaluation identified, UN Women field presences in Asia and the Pacific focused heavily on informal private sector engagement (See Figure 2). Notably, only the WEA implementing countries had formal private sector initiatives (some of which were initiated prior to WEA).<sup>48</sup>

The evaluation team desk review and consultations with UN Women personnel noted several instances where there were synergies between country-level efforts and WEA efforts implemented in the same country.<sup>49</sup> UN Women stakeholders in field offices where WEA was implemented were grateful for the opportunity to participate in the regional programme and believed it built the credibility of their offices in the formal private sector space, pointing to WEA planting the seeds for new projects. WEA efforts in Indonesia supported the development of the national guidelines for gender-responsive business, which may have supported an enabling environment for their existing project WeLearn<sup>50</sup> and other women’s economic empowerment efforts. One conceptual linkage that may come to fruition was provided by the India Country Office, where there was the idea to link the individuals who participated in skills building training through the Second Chance Education programme with WEPs signatories or with WEA Industry Disruptor training programme participants in India to support gender-responsive procurement and hiring.

In the future, coherence between regional programmes and country-level efforts within the same thematic area (and cross-thematic areas discussed below) should be prioritized at the planning stage to ensure efforts complement each other and build on synergies. There is potential to do this through the new WeRise Together programme with DFAT (2022–2025), which aims to connect entrepreneurs and WEPs signatories to advance gender-responsive procurement.

**Synergies between thematic areas**

Opportunities for strengthening internal coherence at country level between thematic areas were identified by the analysis of evaluations. For example, the Pakistan Country Portfolio Evaluation noted that the Prevention of Violent Extremism project, which is aligned with the Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action thematic area was placed under Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Strategic Note with limited conceptual or practical linkages between the areas. Similarly, the Viet Nam Country Portfolio Evaluation noted that Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change are coupled with Women’s Economic Empowerment. While elements of women’s economic empowerment are integrated across all thematic areas, stakeholders consulted as part of these evaluations noted that this coupling may have detracted from each area of work, while others pointed to the need for clarity on where UN Women would focus within the broad area of Women’s Economic Empowerment work. This situation may have been influenced by the corporate guidance on Strategic Notes, which established resource requirements for each thematic area: when a thematic area did not have sufficient resourcing, it would be consolidated with a different thematic area but without elaboration on how those thematic areas aligned.

The IES-led evaluation of ROAP contributions to women, peace and security in Asia and the Pacific also identified several cases where women’s economic empowerment efforts were being implemented in Indonesia and the Philippines (both WEA countries) without input or guidance from the regional level. It concluded that a horizontal approach to looking at how the different initiatives (within the Regional Office and at field presence level) can support each other for greater impact should be built in from the planning stage.<sup>51</sup> The evaluation report notes that according to the project reports, a total of 3,333 women in Indonesia and the Philippines received leadership and entrepreneurship training, and 1,072 benefited from business development grants, loans or a connection to the market. In the Philippines, 213 men were involved as well, and a total of 18 women’s cooperatives were established. For example, training tools, knowledge products and exchanges could have been beneficial between these initiatives for identifying what works, and networks for policy advocacy could have been leveraged to strengthen reach and impact. UN Women stakeholders consulted for this evaluation also identified the need to identify synergies and the benefits of cross-thematic initiatives at the planning stage and with resources attached.

<sup>48</sup> ROAP overview of private sector funding, May 2022.

<sup>49</sup> When reviewing the evaluation report, the WEA team noted that the WEA programme was not intended/designed to ensure linkages between WEA and other country-level efforts and that the limited connections were the result of efforts targeting different target groups.

<sup>50</sup> WeLearn is an online platform established by UN Women Indonesia and supported by Unilever and Google for women entrepreneurs and women who aspire to start their own businesses: <https://welearn.unwomen.org/>.

<sup>51</sup> UN Women, Independent Evaluation Service, Evaluation of UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific contributions to women, peace and security, 2021; <https://gate.unwomen.org/EvaluationDocument/Download?evaluationDocumentID=9677>.

### **Synergies between women's economic empowerment projects at country level**

One clear linkage between country-level efforts was the approach of engaging and empowering market vendors (Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste). However, UN Women has not yet codified this model or facilitated exchange on good practices and lessons learned, which is a role that ROAP could play. The analysis of evaluations also identified scope for enhancing coherence between projects implemented in the same country. For example, the evaluation of the Pakistan home-based workers project identified that a strategic opportunity was missed because two women's economic empowerment

projects did not build synergies and promote collaboration amongst partners: the home-based workers project implementing partner and Handicap International, implementing partner for the project Moving from Charity to Rights-based Model – Delivering as ONE for Empowerment of Women with Disabilities. Similarly, the Nepal Women's Economic Empowerment Thematic Evaluation identified that although efforts were conceptualized as a set of complementary activities addressing different challenges, the lack of explicit connection and coordination between the different activities and partners across a number of districts reduced potential coherence.

## **FINDING 4**

**Joint programmes and formal coordination mechanisms dedicated to women's economic empowerment are increasing at country level in the Asia and the Pacific but remain limited at regional level. Strategic partnerships, particularly within the United Nations system, that hold the most promise for coherence, scaling up and replication are beginning to be established.**

The UN Reform agenda<sup>52</sup> emphasizes the need for the United Nations system to ensure coherence through joint planning, monitoring and evaluation to learn from efforts and ensure approaches are adjusted based on evidence. Efforts of UN Women and other United Nations agencies to align their work with international commitments and coordinate vertically and horizontally is recognized as a critical aspect of the theory of change for Women's Economic Empowerment.

### **Joint programmes provide an avenue for strengthening coherence**

At country level, UN Women has made great strides in joining forces with United Nations system partners to jointly plan and implement programmes. During the period under review, the portfolio analysis identified that more than half, i.e. 51 per cent or 16 out of 31 projects (15 country projects and the regional project PROMISE), were joint programmes (see Annex 12). At country level, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) coordination mechanisms, such as the gender equality theme groups and country programming through the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework likely enhanced potential for joint UNCT initiatives on gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

UN Women, through the WEA programme, has co-organized with other United Nations agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United

Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) contributions to the Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum by organizing sessions on women's entrepreneurship and value chains, transparency to advance women's economic empowerment in businesses, stereotypes and gender bias in workplaces and unpaid care work. The ILO/UN Women Safe and Fair project and WEA crossed the thematic boundaries of Ending Violence Against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment and supported the joint production of research and tools on preventing and responding to sexual harassment in the workplace with a focus on migrant workers, with plans for testing and scaling up. A joint report by ILO and UN Women entitled Ecosystem Landscaping to Advance the Accountability to Implement the Women's Empowerment Principles in ASEAN was also published.

Given that there was only one regional joint project under the Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area (under migration-focused work), it is noted that more joint programmes should be pursued during the next Strategic Note period. United Nations system regional representatives consulted identified space for strengthening joint planning and identifying areas beyond events and joint publications.

<sup>52</sup> Resolution A/RES/72/279 on repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 31 May 2018. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/167/23/PDF/N1816723.pdf?OpenElement>.

More joint programmes are needed to catalyse and scale up work in this thematic area. Regional-level exchange has been ad hoc and based on personal connections or events.

Several new efforts provide potential for catalysing joint action. At regional level, a new United Nations Issue-based Coalition has been established focused on inclusive economic growth, which will provide opportunities for more formal coordination with other United Nations agencies in the future. A memorandum of understanding between ROAP and ADB has recently been renewed. It outlines areas of collaboration with UN Women in Asia and the Pacific in several thematic areas, including under

Women's Economic Empowerment. A joint work plan with ASEAN has also been established, which will catalyse efforts within the sub-region. However, at regional level there were no joint proposals with other United Nations agencies. Stakeholders, both internal and external to UN Women, identified opportunity for synergies with respect to the women's entrepreneurship area. Capacity-building for entrepreneurs is a crowded space, with large international and bilateral agencies (e.g. United Nations, international financial institutions (IFIs), DFAT) having significant resources and expertise and an increasingly strong emphasis on women's economic empowerment and gender mainstreaming (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1. A sample of initiatives related to entrepreneurship by other United Nations agencies in the Asia and the Pacific region**

Name of Initiative	Partner Agencies	Target Countries in Asia Pacific	Objective
<b>SEED</b>	United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)	<b>India, Indonesia and Thailand</b>	Strategize, optimize and award achievements in eco-inclusive entrepreneurship as well as fortify a global network of local business development services providers and offer platforms for coordination between key local, national and international stakeholders.
<b>Disha Project</b>	UNDP	<b>India</b>	Create employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for underprivileged women through skill development, market linkage and entrepreneurial development.
<b>Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)	<b>Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and Viet Nam</b>	Create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to effectively start up and/or expand their businesses through strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem, building capacity, and policy and governance initiatives.
<b>Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative</b>	World Bank and other IFIs, including ADB	<b>Fiji, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Viet Nam</b>	Support women entrepreneurs by scaling up access to financial products and services, building capacity, expanding networks, offering mentors and providing opportunities to link with domestic and global markets.
<b>High Impact Entrepreneurs for Emerging Regions for Action (HiEERA) programme</b>	Empretec India Foundation, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	<b>India, Malaysia, and Viet Nam</b>	Promote innovative and internationally competitive, sustainable SMEs by developing a set of specific competencies and practices that can be acquired and applied by entrepreneurs.
<b>Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post-COVID-19</b>	ILO, International Training Centre, of the ILO, and Google	<b>Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand</b>	Digital training programmes in the Google Primer learning applications where women entrepreneurs can access free, quick and easy to understand lessons on how to manage their business, strengthen their online presence and create a more supportive workplace.

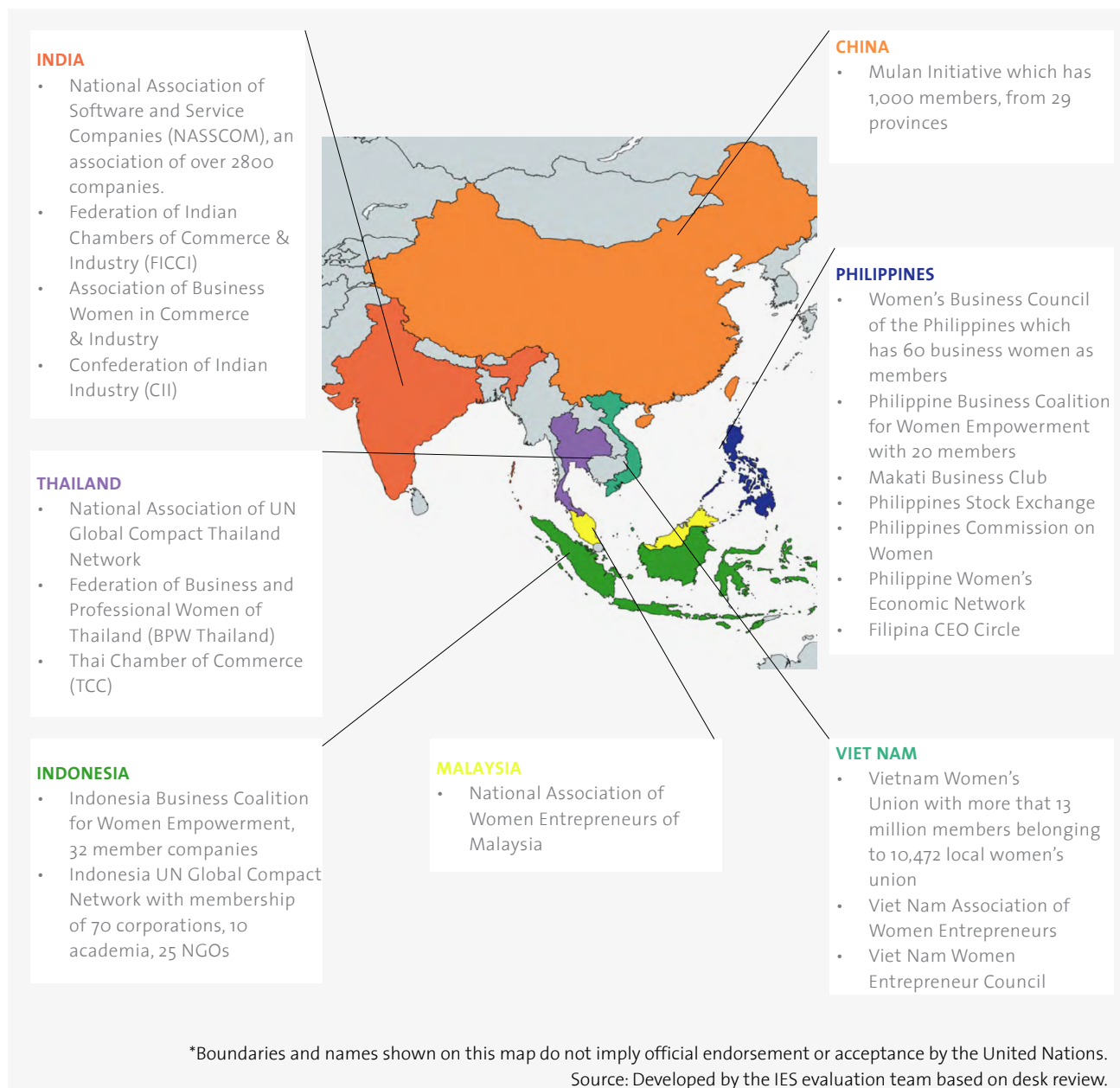
Source: Compiled by evaluation team based on desk review and consultations.

## Strengthening coordination through networks

Through its convening role, UN Women engages a diverse array of stakeholders to collaborate and exchange information on women's economic empowerment initiatives, which enhances potential for coherence and longer-term results. Such networks can multiply reach and institutionalize interventions over time. For example, through the Markets for Change model in the Pacific, UN Women supported the establishment of MVAs. At regional level,

UN Women tapped into a diverse array of business networks through the WEA programme to participate in events and training (see Figure 4). Representatives of these networks consulted recognized WEPs advocacy as an important niche for UN Women to enhance leadership and advocacy. These stakeholders also identified opportunities for engaging more systematically to multiply reach and contribute to a coherent approach to country-level advocacy on women's economic empowerment.

**FIGURE 4: Examples of engagement with business networks in WEA countries**



**EFFECTIVENESS**

How is UN Women advancing the women's economic empowerment agenda in the Asia and the Pacific providing innovative solutions and directly benefiting women's economic empowerment through the approach of private sector engagement?

**FINDING 5**

### UN Women's strength lies in its ability to promote the empowerment of women to take up leadership roles and achieve agency over their decisions related to economic activity through capacity building and collective organizing activities.

Agency is a necessary condition in the reconstructed theory of change for Women's Economic Empowerment (see infographic on page 17 under the introduction). As outlined in the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) framework on women's economic empowerment,<sup>53</sup> "when a woman is able to define and make choices (agency), she is better able to advance economically." UN Women evaluative evidence points towards capacity-building and collective organizing activities across the region contributing to participants reporting increased awareness of their rights and skills, which gives them confidence to speak up, take leadership positions and network with others to improve their economic status.

In the Pacific, the Markets for Change programme focused on the establishment or strengthening of representative bodies for market vendors, who were empowered to influence policies governing the market space in which they conduct their businesses.<sup>54</sup> Establishment of MVAs has strengthened the networking and collective bargaining of women market vendors and increased their representation and voice in the local decision-making process. Market vendors consulted by the evaluation team attended workshops on communications, conflict resolution, financial literacy, leadership skills, customer service, financial management, digital literacy and bookkeeping. In 2021, a total of 12 MVAs, reaching approximately 3,000 members, had been registered thanks to the continued technical assistance and capacity-building activities provided by Markets for Change.<sup>55</sup> In response to COVID-19, the MVAs employed their leadership skills by engaging in decision-making spaces to ensure their voices were heard as markets remained open and operating as essential service providers, while maintaining COVID-19 health and safety protocols.

The programme also engaged with the Ministry for Local Government in Fiji to review market by-laws across 12 municipal councils in Fiji, resulting in the adoption of a gender-responsive and consultative process with women market vendors. However, a need was expressed to explain new and proposed by-laws in local languages and dialects in order to ensure maximum participation, especially of rural women and groups within the market.

Similarly, the evaluation of a Safe Cities and Safe Public Transport Programme in Papua New Guinea found evidence that previously marginalized women vendors were able to develop a collective identity and for the first time obtained a voice in the management of markets through the establishment of multi-stakeholder market management committees. In Nepal, the Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment and the Future We Want projects were effective in mobilizing citizens to increase women's awareness of their rights and strengthen their ability to make their voices heard. There is evidence<sup>56</sup> that women supported by UN Women Nepal have improved their self-confidence through participation in income-generation activities, local politics and leadership in community and governance affairs. In Pakistan, the evaluation of the home-based workers programme identified that these workers, including persons with disabilities and transgender persons, felt recognized and more confident in advocating for their rights. Participants of WeRise (WEA initiative implemented in Indonesia and Thailand which provided capacity-building training and toolkits for entrepreneurs and accelerators to build a more gender-inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem) consulted noted that they were able to negotiate better, including on agreements in their personal life with male family members concerning their engagement in economic activities. They were also exposed to gender equality concepts and how to consider these in growing their business.

<sup>53</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2011. Understanding and Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment. Accessed from: <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Understanding-measuring-womens-economic-empowerment.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> In 2019, the UN Women Multi-Country Office in Fiji reported that 11 out of 17 market vendors associations (65 per cent) were led by a woman president and over 74 per cent of positions in the Executive Committees of the associations across the three countries (Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) were held by women.

<sup>55</sup> As reported in the UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office Annual Report (2021).

<sup>56</sup> Reported in Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment programme and Future We Want project documentation and confirmed during group discussions of women beneficiaries held by the evaluation team that carried out the Women's Economic Empowerment Thematic Evaluation of UN Women Nepal.

Peer learning was identified by participants consulted as an important result of the “Industry Disrupter” initiative of WEA, which supported women entrepreneur skill building in India to be connected and confident. While there was little evidence of results entailing more women in corporate decision-making and leadership, several companies had started internal conversations about how to work towards gender-responsive recruitment and promotion and appointing women to senior management and company boards, thereby increasing their agency.

UN Women could build on leadership and agency for women through advocacy and leveraging the resources of governments and other United Nations and affiliated agencies, as well as private sector companies to expand and scale up these results. Capacity-building with women’s business, entrepreneurship and civil society organizations to contribute to delivering these outcomes could also allow for scale and replicability and be a more effective use of UN Women’s resources and expertise than offering direct services to individual groups of women. Similarly, working with mainstream business organizations such as chambers of commerce could help accelerate efforts to promote women in leadership positions in the corporate sector.

## FINDING 6

**UN Women’s capacity-building efforts in the Asia and the Pacific in support of women entrepreneurs and MSMEs enhanced skills and in some instances led to an immediate increase in income. However, more attention is needed in the longer term for stimulating access to and control over financial tools and market access for women, which could be catalytic and provide a basis for scaling up efforts.**

Awareness-raising and capacity-building is an essential strategy for realizing UN Women’s theory of change for Women’s Economic Empowerment. Consultations with rights holders/project beneficiaries and the analysis evidence point towards enhanced confidence, network-building, awareness and business or livelihoods skills for participants. In some cases, and especially in micro-entrepreneurship initiatives, this led to an immediate increase in income.<sup>57</sup> In the more successful cases a holistic approach supported an enabling environment, embedding potential for sustainability through linkages between individuals, institutions and networks. However, overall evidence on how longer term economic and social benefits are to be achieved is lacking. For the training to be more beneficial to participants, this evaluation identified the need to ensure programmes are designed to include follow-up with a stronger focus on value chain and market linkages and access to finance, markets and investors. In many cases, the numbers included in training efforts were small, and even when the programmes were implemented over a longer period, different cohorts were engaged each time, with little follow-up support or tracking of outcomes. In the case of WEA, identification of how the potential models and innovative practices piloted since 2019 could be scaled up is needed to maintain the momentum attained with these cohorts during the implementation period.<sup>58</sup>

**a) WEA capacity-building efforts with entrepreneurs increased awareness around gender-responsive business, enhanced business skills and models and facilitated connections between entrepreneurs. The short time frame for WEA capacity-building efforts did not allow for application of lessons learned and follow-up with participants, and some participants expect more to be done with respect to fostering linkages to investors or financing institutions to stimulate longer term benefits for businesses or entrepreneurs (see Annex 15).**

Given that engaging with the formal private sector<sup>59</sup> (including corporations, SMEs and entrepreneurs) was a new area of work for UN Women in the Asia and the Pacific region, the WEA programme had a lengthy and thorough period of preparation to launch capacity-building activities, including through needs assessments, identifying stakeholders and contracting implementing partners, as well as preparing tools and materials and generating an extensive range of knowledge products. In addition, adaptation for delivery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges, leading to a quick adaptation to digital and online delivery formats. The selection of implementing partners with strong expertise and mentoring capacity for the transfer of entrepreneurial culture and skills to develop gender-responsive business models was key for successfully operationalizing the various components: WeRise, the Industry Disruptor and the Care Accelerator (see Figure 5).

<sup>57</sup> The WEA team noted that increasing income was not the objective for SMEs engaged in their initiatives, given that there are other indicators of economic advancement, such as investment pipeline and debt measures.

<sup>58</sup> The WEA team noted that there has been some funding secured to follow up with some cohorts.

<sup>59</sup> As defined in the introduction of this report.

FIGURE 5: Overview of capacity-building initiatives: Care Accelerator, Industry Disruptor and WeRise

**CARE ACCELERATOR (Asia Pacific)**

**USD FOR IMPLEMENTING PARTNER**  
213,737



**DURATION**  
11 weeks over 4 months with weekly mentoring sessions



**REACH**  
13 Asia Pacific based companies (includes research + training)

**GOOD PRACTICE**

- Exploration of innovative business models and training on gender responsive entrepreneurship skills for SMEs to match child and elder care services.
- Follow-on support after program end, exposure to potential investors and access to the program partner's global network.
- Sharing of tools development with adaptation of WeRise training material.
- Assessment of the regulatory environment in WEA countries on the development of care entrepreneurship models and Policy review of unpaid care work policies in Asia Pacific

**AREAS FOR ATTENTION**

- Future work on building a care economy in AP can be informed by the Care Accelerator experiences, but would need far greater investment and concertation with other players to achieve outcomes.

**INDUSTRY DISRUPTOR (India)**

**USD FOR IMPLEMENTING PARTNER**  
249,573



**DURATION**  
Six week online course for 160 SMEs | 55 SME's in two day bootcamps



**REACH**  
122 Indian based SMEs

**GOOD PRACTICE**

- Cross-fertilization of international companies, investors, mentors and women-led businesses with potential for supply chain agreements and venture capital funding.
- Engagement of partner with strong Indian presence and sustainable approach to entrepreneurship development both at policy and practical intervention levels.
- 82% participants gained skills and knowledge on creating a gender-equitable, sustainable fashion venture as per post- training assessment.

**AREAS FOR ATTENTION**

- Country Office follow-up to ensure women entrepreneur participants are linked to programmes and activities to sustain and translate the entrepreneurship awareness and skills training into actionable measures.
- Identify potential linkages for follow-up with Empretec partner implementing the High Impact Entrepreneurs for Emerging Regions for Action (HiEERA) with UNCTAD and UN Women India.

**We Rise (Indonesia)**

**USD FOR IMPLEMENTING PARTNER**  
168,498



**DURATION**  
Weekly sessions over one month for accelerators | 2-3 days training for women led SMEs



**REACH**  
84 companies from Indonesia  
more intensive training  
420 participants Thailand

**GOOD PRACTICE**

- Participatory self- assessment methodology of WeRise training tools for accelerators and women entrepreneurs.
- Strong engagement and networking with women's business associations to promote the WEPs.
- Accelerator/Training of Trainers approach for sustainability and ownership.

**AREAS FOR ATTENTION**

- Regional Office support to Country Office for follow-up on WEPs implementation and maintaining links with women's business coalition and business organizations.
- Need for stronger stable staff presence on women's economic empowerment to sustain mobilization of WEPs signatories and women led businesses, as well as supporting work with the ASEAN secretariat on women's economic empowerment.



(Source: Developed by the evaluation team based on desk review and consultation with participants.)

WeRise in Indonesia targeted 84 women-led SMEs from different areas in Indonesia. They were identified as the “missing middle”, as they were considered too big for microfinance institutions and too small or risky for traditional finance providers such as commercial banks. Women received training on the use of WeRise toolkits for entrepreneurs and accelerators. The Industry Disruptor targeted entrepreneurs in the Indian fashion and lifestyle<sup>60</sup> industry supply chains and provided online training for 100 participants and two rounds of a more in-depth “boot camp” for 22 entrepreneurs in each session. It also engaged EU-based companies in training and mentoring to allow for exchange.

The Care Accelerator entrepreneurship activity targeted a unique set of entrepreneurs in the care industry in Asia and the Pacific, with the objective to strengthen existing and build new business approaches to increase access, affordability and quality of care services with the potential to document lessons learned on bringing innovation into the care economy. Thirteen companies that focused on some aspect of care delivery (for children or the elderly) were engaged in a four-month online capacity-building and networking course. The lessons learned are documented in a “think piece” to be published by WEA.

Women-led business participants consulted from across the different entrepreneurship activities particularly valued the mentoring and coaching provided by the implementing partners and the awareness-raising on gender-responsive business models. Further training was recommended by the WEA capacity-building participants consulted, e.g., on how to further tap into the digital business ecosystems and on how to access supply chains. It was also noted that building networks and support for applying skills, accessing financing and market access takes a much longer time frame than delivering short-term training. Beyond training, most of the participants interviewed referred to the perennial difficulty of raising financing for their businesses and where and how to access funding. There is an expectation that UN Women could assist as a follow-up to training and programmes. At this stage, however, examples of how UN Women supported linkages with finance for women-led businesses were scarce, considering the short implementation period of the WEA programme. The WEA team noted that it was not the intent to directly link participants with finance given the early stage of engagement.

The level of engagement of UN Women Country Offices in the training initiatives delivered by external partners varied and, in some cases, there was limited follow-through in exploring linkages to financing and building networks. This is an opportunity for the future.

Another focus of WEA was linking EU-based companies with companies based in the Asia and the Pacific region. Despite some good interactions with global companies during training and mentoring under the Industry Disruptor component, most interviewees with the exception of one, indicated that there was no ongoing engagement or follow-up. Mentoring partners for Care Accelerator, WeRise and Industry Disruptor had a high level of entrepreneurship expertise, but not all had gender expertise and/or sufficient knowledge of local policies, norms, and business processes. Also, entrepreneurs consulted for Industry Disruptor observed that the programme could have been more effective and actionable if linked to country and local perspectives and requirements rather than more oriented to global perspectives. The WEA team noted that lessons learned were integrated into the second cohort, where more India-based partners were involved, which was appreciated by the participants.

**b) Markets for Change employed a holistic and long-term approach to informal sector capacity-building, which has led to enhanced agency and voice. However, there is a need for continued support to secure long-term social and economic benefits (see Annex 15).**

The Markets for Change programme in Fiji was innovative in employing a long-term holistic approach, combining an individual capacity-building, collective organizing and an enabling environment through governmental engagement and a focus on inclusion of women’s voices in decision-making around market infrastructure. Partnering with local governments to establish marketplace management systems with the participation and organization of the market vendors themselves supported an institutional framework for sustained actions. Such integrated approaches, however, need to be implemented in partnership with other agencies that have the technical expertise and resources for aspects such as infrastructure development and maintenance over the longer term, as was identified by the 2022 IAS audit of the Fiji Multi-Country Office.

Feedback from the 104 market vendors consulted in Fiji (94 female, 12 male) from across 7 (out of the total 13) markets reflected their appreciation of the infrastructure and facility improvements in the marketplace. A participatory approach meant that the vendors themselves identified the changes needed in relation to congestion, security, sanitation, ventilation, provision of accommodation for rural women vendors and access to stalls and equipment such as tables and chairs.

<sup>60</sup> This is a term utilized by WEA to cover the broad industry that covers apparel, accessories, jewellery, etc.



Market observations by the evaluation and internal audit team<sup>61</sup> identified challenges for the maintenance of installations, some of which were already damaged and deteriorating (e.g., security cameras, tents and bins), as well as for resolving conflicts between vendors who have many stalls and others who are not able to gain access to any stall, especially in cases where they cannot pay fees to the MVAs. However, as the 2022 IAS audit of the Fiji Multi-Country Office identified, to mitigate high inherent risks of wrongdoing and fraud, which are often present in construction processes, UN Women headquarters needs to put in place policy, procedures and guidance to support field offices engaged in supporting infrastructure work.

Training on financial and digital literacy, customer service, food handling, leadership, negotiation and mediation skills, and first aid was very welcome. After these interventions, market vendors reported being more confident and able to speak up in meetings and voice their concerns to local council officials and public figures. UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office reported that market vendors have improved economic security through better financial and agricultural management and increased access to services, such as banking, microinsurance, provident funds and money transfers, among others. The MVAs have worked towards improving the socio-economic status of women and men in the markets. For example, MVAs have provided technical assistance to members on their applications for the Fiji Government loan to small business entrepreneurs, which supports them financially to operate their business during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, recurring tropical cyclones in the region have significantly reduced the income of market vendors.<sup>62</sup> Some of the primary reasons for this include an increase in supply chain costs due to the high percentage of crops affected by the cyclone as well as a reduction in customers due to their inability to access markets. Some vendor farmers were trained to increase agricultural productivity, including on the use of chemicals and fertilizer, pest management and climate-smart agricultural practices.

However, vendors have expressed a need to diversify training topics, and some mentioned the need for training in local languages in order to ensure that these exercises are inclusive of rural women and casual vendors.

The Fiji Multi-Country Office reported that training activities were adapted to rural market vendors (who spend a short time in the market), e.g., by holding shorter training sessions at accommodation centres in the evenings or on days when casual vendors are in town. Maintaining short-term gains made during the life of the project, let alone making needed infrastructure improvements, depends on the continued injection of resources, technical expertise and ensuring that all vendors can access the marketplace.

**c) Other country-level capacity-building efforts were short, one-off training initiatives targeting small groups of women. While there are cases of an immediate increase in income, limited tracking and follow-up with participants makes it difficult to identify whether these increases led to sustainable economic empowerment.**

The analysis of evaluations identified that there are cases of immediate increase in incomes (e.g., home-based workers in Pakistan; women farmers in Qinghai Province, China; and women from excluded groups in Nepal). In line with the findings of this evaluation, however, the analysis of evaluations also points out that without a longer term perspective and tracking it is difficult to understand whether these increases are sustainable or led to catalytic business growth. In Nepal, women beneficiaries of women's economic empowerment projects reported that they continued to face challenges to scale up their activity and income, mainly because of lack of access to markets to sell their products and to opportunities along the supply chain. For example, women contractors are excluded from certain markets because they do not have investments or the right equipment to comply with procurement regulations or lack connections with building companies. Several programmes linked women with access to bank accounts, which is a huge benefit. However, the next step of linking with financing opportunities was often missing from the programme design. There were also some unintended consequences (both positive and negative) encountered with establishing bank accounts. On the positive side, it helped to support women (generally the most marginalized) to acquire citizenship papers to open accounts (e.g., Pakistan and Nepal). However, there were also reports from Papua New Guinea that market vendors did not end up using the bank accounts that had been opened because they were not easily accessible.

<sup>61</sup> An audit of the Fiji Multi-Country Office led by the UN Women Internal Audit Service was ongoing during the evaluation, and the teams collaborated on data collection. The auditor visited four markets to conduct observations, interviews and group discussions; the evaluation consultant visited the same four markets and an additional three markets. In total, 7 out of 13 markets where programming has been implemented were visited.

<sup>62</sup> As part of the programme, a total of 801 market vendors were interviewed in annual surveys over 4 years (2016–2019). A rapid analysis of this data conducted by AKVO, Fiji, shows that 97 per cent of the respondents said their income had been reduced as a result of Tropical Cyclone Ana (2021). Twenty-three per cent of the vendors interviewed stated that they are trying to diversify the products in the face of loss of income as a result of Tropical Cyclone Yasa (2020).

## FINDING 7

**UN Women in the Asia and the Pacific is contributing to advancing an enabling environment for women’s economic empowerment in relation to linkages between governments, the private sector and civil society. UN Women has demonstrated its ability to convene diverse stakeholders and to catalyse commitments and actions towards women’s economic empowerment. However, there is space for increasing efforts to drive needed regulatory change to facilitate scaling up and ensure sustainability.**

The Women’s Economic Empowerment theory of change identifies an enabling environment as a key factor for achieving women’s economic empowerment. UN Women has employed three main strategies for building an enabling environment, namely: (a) advocacy and mobilization of private sector actors around WEPs and related capacity-building/awareness-raising, (b) technical support to civil society and government to advocate and adopt policies related to women’s economic empowerment and (c) production of research or knowledge and communications products, including social media.

On the normative side, UN Women is making good progress, including in areas linked to the private sector, but there is a perception by both internal and external stakeholders (i.e., development partners) that more could be done to better link programmatic initiatives with policy-level influence (as discussed under Finding 2). Internal stakeholders consulted pointed to the lack of internal technical expertise that could provide guidance, e.g., on macroeconomic policy to “build back better” in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. ROAP has thus proposed a new, core-funded Gender Economist position to support progress in this area during the new regional Strategic Note 2022–2025.

Policies to support gender equality and women’s economic empowerment need to be put in place and implemented by governments and the private sector. The degree and nature of progress also depends on the actual situation of the groups of women targeted within and across countries, i.e., women SME entrepreneurs, market vendors and employees of companies, and the extent to which their rights, protection and enabling environments are determined by the formal and informal sector settings in which private sector businesses are operating.

### **a) Advocacy and mobilization of private sector actors around WEPs and related capacity-building/awareness-raising (see Annex 14).**

A key component of the WEA programme was the focus on engaging companies and building an enabling environment for women’s economic empowerment in the private sector to make public commitments towards gender equality through the adoption of WEPs. WEPs components included WEPs awareness raising, WEPs related research and knowledge products, WEPs Awards and WEPs Activator capacity-building. These resulted in strong mobilization of companies across the region and furthered the awareness and implementation of measures and tools at both the workplace and the marketplace in many instances (see Figure 6). Policy advocacy briefs and ASEAN landscaping produced by the WEA programme provide an opportunity to increase awareness of governments and decision-makers on WEPs and the policy actions needed at ASEAN and national levels to accelerate the implementation of WEPs-related thematic areas.

WEA stimulated reach and created considerable momentum with a significant increase in the number of companies in Asia and the Pacific becoming WEPs signatories. The number of WEPs signatories in the seven WEA countries increased from 156 in 2019 to 1231 by June 2022.<sup>63</sup> The roll-out of the WEPs Awards initiative at the national and regional levels resulted in advocacy and visibility for WEPs, UN Women and its funding partners, the EU and DFAT, which started to support the WEPs Awards from 2021. The WEPs Awards enabled the showcasing of good business practices, increased awareness and fostered multistakeholder engagements, as well as promoting more companies to become WEPs signatories.

<sup>63</sup> WEA reported that the Asia Pacific region had the fastest growing number of signatories compared with other regions.

Awardee companies interviewed expressed appreciation for the awards application process in assisting them to analyze and assess progress on women's economic empowerment given that they already had measures in place for gender equality that they could showcase for the WEPs Awards competition. These companies welcomed the usefulness of WEPs to hone their policies further, as well as the opportunity to gain visibility and credit for their efforts through participation in the WEPs Awards. Respondents to the WEA-led survey, Trends and Future Opportunities to Advance Gender Equality in the Private Sector – Implementing the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) in Asia-Pacific, were asked what inspired them to join the WEPs community. Knowledge exchange and access to new knowledge products and updates on the latest trends received the highest number of votes (63 per cent or N= 95/152 and 57 per cent or N=86/152), apart from visibility and credibility (59 per cent or N= 90/152).<sup>64</sup> Companies consulted by the evaluation team also expressed the wish for UN Women to facilitate networking among WEPs awardees and WEPs signatories to exchange on challenges and lessons learned and furthering understanding of the business case for gender equality and women's economic empowerment and how these can be practically integrated into their business models.

WEPs Activator capacity-building initiatives covered the seven WEA countries with varying types of awareness-raising activities and training sessions for private sector companies (See Annex 15). Recognizing that the capacity-building was short-term, evidence of the impact of these initiatives on workplace and marketplace policies and practice leading to increased gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the participating companies is scarce. Feedback from companies consulted revealed high appreciation for the WEPs framework and the Gap Analysis Tool to review and improve their gender equality measures in the workplace. Although the WEA team has collected self-reports of actions taken by companies through their survey, an evidence base of these actions is required for monitoring progress, accountability and facilitating learning on the good practices.

The WEA project included EU companies in WEPs Activator activities with a view to adding value by creating synergies with Asia Pacific companies. EU companies also reported appreciation for the training offered in collaboration with the trade association amfori, conducted by Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) and UN Women,<sup>65</sup> and the usefulness of the WEPs framework and the Gender Gap Analysis Tool. The amfori member companies selected were EU-based larger brands with strong supply chains in WEA countries impacting EU trade. Companies interviewed reported significant challenges with their supply chains as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contact and synergy between EU and Asia Pacific companies through the WEA project was not envisioned in the WEA design. WEA reported that together with BSR, revisions to enhance the gender responsiveness of their Business Social Compliance Initiative were adopted as a standard for their suppliers to follow. UN Women and amfori have also renewed their memorandum of understanding beyond the WEA project implementation period.

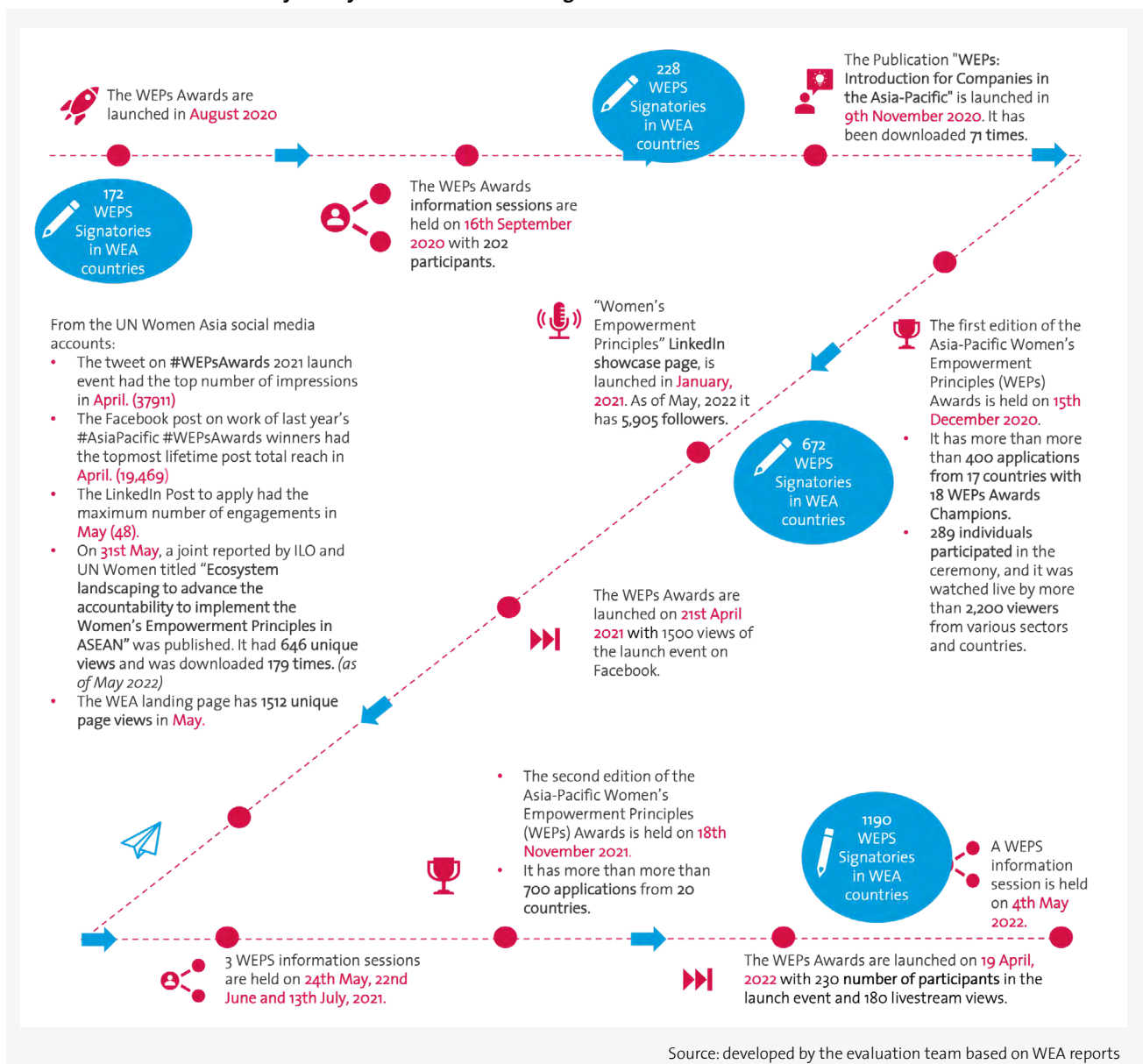
On the basis of consultations and the desk review, how companies have used the WEPs framework as a guide for integrating gender equality into their policies and practice, the impact of these initiatives, and their contributions towards gender equality, as well as the impact on company outcomes (the business case) are unclear. Few WEPs signatories report on gender indicators on the UNWWEPs.org data base. This reflects a need for strengthened accountability and a monitoring mechanism for WEPs. Progress on this front has been made through the WEPs Transparency and Accountability Framework.<sup>66</sup> UN Women hopes that this will serve as a tool for transparent reporting, but this will require follow-up efforts. Together with an impact evaluation, results could be better captured to learn about what works. (See Annex 14 for more detail on the WEPs case study.)

<sup>64</sup> The response rate for this survey was low (10.8% or N = 152/1405), therefore the results of this survey should not be generalized.

<sup>65</sup> Amfori is an Italian membership based organization offering trade, social and environment services for resilience and sustainability of global sourcing strategies. As part of Amfori's Gender Equality Strategy and partnership with UN Women, Amfori offers members exclusive and free access to participate in the 'WEPs Activator' and join the Women's Empowerment Principles community.

<sup>66</sup> The framework was developed by UN Women with the support of BSR and with EU financial support from through the WE EMPOWER-G7, WeEmpower Asia and Win-Win Programmes as well as amfori. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/creating-transparency-on-gender-equality-to-transform-business>.

FIGURE 6: The WEPs awards journey - momentum building



## b) Technical support to civil society, business networks and government to advocate and adopt policies related to women's economic empowerment.

UN Women has an important normative mandate and contributes to influencing national legislation and policy implementation relevant to women's economic empowerment, but much more focus is needed to catalyze change. Reform at the institutional level is imperative to advance positive social norms. One of the primary strengths of UN Women, as recognized by stakeholders consulted, is the organization's convening power between government and the private sector. For example, in Pakistan, UN Women provided technical support to the Governments of Balochistan and Punjab in the drafting and implementation of the policy on the Punjab Home Based Workers Act, 2021, which guarantees social security to home-based workers.

Under the Markets for Change project in Fiji, a gender-responsive and consultative process with market vendors is being undertaken to review market by-laws that govern market decrees and market governance structures. The WEA programme supported buy-in from governments by engaging with policy actors through knowledge products, technical support and dialogue focused on WEPs, women-owned businesses and business and human rights (see Box 3). While WEA has constructively engaged with policymakers to identify and propose solutions that target structural barriers faced by women in the private sector, policy-level change takes time, and efforts to influence policy and support implementation need to be a strong focus moving forward.

### BOX 3. Examples of progress towards normative and policy change in the region

#### Progress towards furthering women's economic empowerment with ASEAN

- A joint ASEAN-UN Women work plan for 2021–2025 includes promoting an enabling ecosystem for the development of women's entrepreneurship under Women's Economic Empowerment, which will further normative and policy change at the sub-regional level. UN Women/WEA has also contributed to the ASEAN Entrepreneurship Declaration, which is to be launched in late 2022.

#### Viet Nam Government adopts gender-responsive decree on supporting policies for SMEs and programme to support implementation

- UN Women Viet Nam/WEA reported<sup>67</sup> that Decree No. 80/2021/ND-CP on supporting policies for SMEs was developed with more gender responsiveness based on UN Women's technical input in partnership with the Agency for Enterprises Development of the Ministry of Planning and Investment (AED – MPI). A complementary National Programme on the Enhancement of Competitiveness for Women-owned SMEs 2021–2025 was also established with input from UN Women Viet Nam in collaboration with the AED – MPI. The goal is to enhance the competitiveness of women-owned SMEs, supporting them to adapt to the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic, develop business models, access and expand international markets, and develop an ecosystem that supports the progress of women entrepreneurs.

#### Consultative review of market by-laws in Fiji by including women market vendors

- In order to ensure a gender-responsive and consultative process with women market vendors, Markets for Change has linked them with the Ministry for Local Government in Fiji to review the market by-laws across 12 municipal councils in Fiji.

Source: reported by UN Women – more examples in Annex Volume 2

### c) Production of research or knowledge and communications products, including social media

UN Women's extensive generation of knowledge products has contributed to advancing an enabling business environment (see Annex 9.6 for a sample of knowledge products on women's economic empowerment produced by UN Women Country Offices in the Asia and the Pacific region). Its social media presence together with the nurturing of networks and collaboration with women's business organizations and local partners has enhanced visibility on its initiatives throughout the region based on the reported reach. The production and accessibility of advocacy tools are key for influencing policy change at the national level and for intergovernmental efforts, such as ASEAN, with which UN Women has been cooperating.

The tools are also a strategic pathway for collaborating with other United Nations agencies that have access to the most relevant ministries for policy change on women's economic empowerment. In addition, knowledge-sharing with private sector actors is necessary for engaging their interest and commitment. Research, such as the survey on time use conducted by the regional Gender Statistics team, entitled *The Telling Nature of Time: What Time-Use Reveals about Gender Equality in Afghanistan* (2021), and [The Impact of COVID-19 on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in Afghanistan: Insights from the Afghanistan Time Use Survey](#) (May 2020) have helped to fill knowledge gaps.

The WEA knowledge products were reviewed in depth as part of the case study, which identified that 59 knowledge products had been developed since 2019 (see Annex 13).<sup>68</sup> Around a quarter of these products were research advocacy briefs, while another quarter were related to training. Several policy-related knowledge products were produced, such as the *Ecosystem Landscaping to Advance the Accountability to Implement the Women's Empowerment Principles in ASEAN*, jointly produced with the ILO. The most popular products were the short and targeted COVID-19 women's economic empowerment briefs, such as the *Guidance Note for Action: Supporting SMEs to Ensure the Economic COVID-19 Recovery Is Gender-Responsive and Inclusive*, which had a high of 640 downloads. Social media efforts supported visibility of products and events. The second WEA donor report notes that the #WEPsAwards campaign reached more than 16 million unique social media and Internet users during the reporting period (1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021), generating more than 10,000 online interactions and engagements, including on the awardees' social media accounts and company websites. The tweet on the #WEPsAwards 2021 launch event had the top number of impressions in April 2021 (37,911), and a Facebook post on #AsiaPacific #WEPsAwards winners had the highest lifetime post total reach in April (19,469). While the WEA team conducted surveys of event participants, no systematic information was collected on the use of knowledge products, which would help to build a better understanding of which products are the most valued and how they are being used. This could also help inform on where to invest limited resources.

ROAP has planned to establish a knowledge management position as part of the new Strategic Note to facilitate regional knowledge-sharing. There is scope for ensuring that UN Women is focused on producing, utilizing and sharing knowledge in a way that leverages synergies across initiatives and thematic areas and increases networking so that the focus is on quality, reach and utility rather than quantity.

<sup>67</sup> UN Women Viet Nam, Annual report 2021.

<sup>68</sup> The evaluation team analysed the WEA knowledge products based on a list of 59 knowledge products provided to the team in February 2022. The WEA team, as of finalizing this report, noted that this list has now been expanded to include a total of 158 knowledge products.

**CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY**

How did UN Women ensure regional and national ownership of private sector engagement for the women's economic empowerment agenda, and which areas of the WEA approach have the most potential for replication and scaling up?

**FINDING 8**

**Innovative models developed in Asia and the Pacific have potential to be replicated and scaled up but depend on documenting lessons learned, codification of models, ongoing UN Women institutional support, resource mobilization and strategic partnerships, which is essential to create sustainability and scale up over the longer term.**

UN Women's programmes on Women's Economic Empowerment in the region have focused on small-scale capacity-building, targeting a wide spectrum of private sector actors ranging from microenterprises to SMEs through to multinational enterprises (MNEs), as well as potential investors. Targeted capacity-building with both private and public sector actors is critical for transformational change in legislation and company policy and implementation. UN Women has led innovative research and incubation of ideas, some integrating an emphasis on ecosystems (interconnected systems influencing change).

The analysis of evaluations<sup>69</sup> and the case studies for this evaluation have identified that continuity and scale appear to be the major challenges for UN Women's innovative work on women's entrepreneurship. When discrete initial project funding sources dry up, continuity is difficult unless there is a second phase (ensuring follow-up with the same cohort) or take-up through joint UNCT programming or work with other partners. There is a need to move beyond skill-building to help women entrepreneurs scale up, build capacity and network to tap into support mechanisms and build branding, as well as to support business development and quality control and ensure eventual access to finance through facilitating linkages with financial institutions and IFIs. Continued support to strengthening leadership and self-confidence through mentorship of women entrepreneurs is also a priority.

Replicating and scaling up many of the diverse women's economic empowerment activities in the region is challenging without codifying and sharing models as a basis for a long-term vision and partnerships. The absence of an overall regional strategy and broader programming efforts during the period of review may have contributed to a lack of overall vision. Efforts to draft a broader regional Women's Economic Empowerment strategy are under way, but a strategy has yet to be adopted. Partnerships such as the global programme between UN Women and ILO<sup>70</sup> and the recent agreement between the same agencies in Bangladesh or the renewed memorandum of understanding between UN Women and ADB hold promise for focusing on UN Women's value added, scaling up interventions and enhancing visibility. Given UN Women's limited human and financial resources, lessons learned should inform which areas to prioritize to achieve more scalable and sustainable results.

Based on the case studies, the evaluation identified three key areas where UN Women has brought value added to women's economic empowerment models that have the potential to inform larger programmes either with or by others, to be adopted and replicated by others, or to serve as models for integration in government policies and programmes<sup>71</sup> (see infographic on page 39). Ideas on how to ensure or enhance scalability and sustainability were also identified by the evaluation team.

<sup>69</sup> Such as the Thematic Evaluation of Women's Economic Empowerment programme in Nepal and the evaluation of the Economic Empowerment of Women Home-Based Workers and Excluded Groups programme in Pakistan.

<sup>70</sup> UN Women and ILO Joint Programme Promoting Decent Employment through Inclusive Growth Policies and Investments in Care. See: [https://www.ilo.org/employment/about/news/WCMS\\_741946/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=The%20UN%20Women%20%2D%20ILO%20Joint,19%20crisis%20and%20recovery%20phase](https://www.ilo.org/employment/about/news/WCMS_741946/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=The%20UN%20Women%20%2D%20ILO%20Joint,19%20crisis%20and%20recovery%20phase).

<sup>71</sup> UN Women's corporate evaluation on innovation identified several ways in which the organization's innovative work has more potential for scalability: UN Women undertakes a small innovative research and pilot project, the findings from which will inform larger programmes or actions supported by others; UN Women develops an innovative model that is adopted and replicated by others; UN Women's innovative initiatives are integrated with government systems and aligned with government priorities.

**INFOGRAPHIC: UN Women value added to women's economic empowerment models that have potential for scalability**


## FINDING 9

**Two models explored in Asia and the Pacific hold the most promise for leveraging UN Women's value added, building evidence on the business case and stimulating catalytic results: the holistic models developed to implement WEPs and Markets for Change. ROAP could play a role in codifying the models and facilitating knowledge exchange and uptake by other UN Women offices so that they can become signature interventions.**

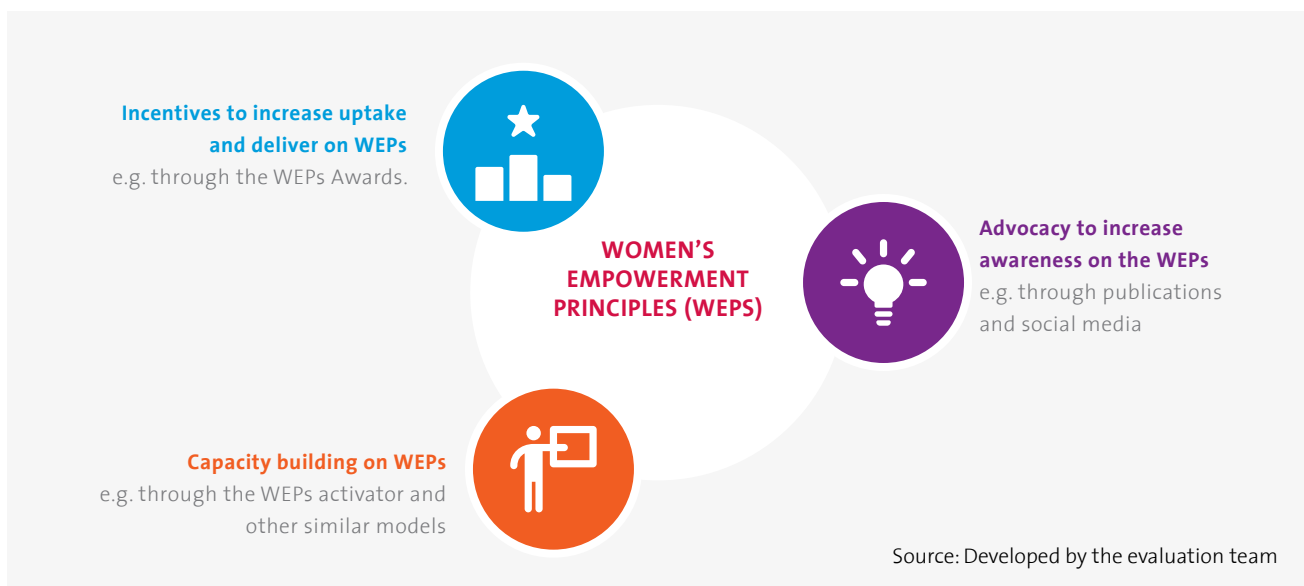
### The WEPs model

WEPs (see the infographic in the introduction section) was established in 2010 and has been a longstanding global initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact. The WEA programme has helped to accelerate progress in terms of awareness and uptake of WEPs signatories in the region (see Finding 7 and Annex 13) by establishing a comprehensive approach encompassing advocacy, capacity-building and incentives (see figure 7). However, it is still early days for the region. The evidence base on how these companies have updated or adopted policies based on WEPs is still limited; there is limited understanding about the extent to which WEPs has stimulated catalytic results for gender equality within the private sector; and there is a need to build evidence from WEPs signatories about the business case that can be used to mobilize support from others.

The main challenge recognized by stakeholders both internal and external to UN Women is that there is currently no way to hold companies accountable for reporting on progress implementing the principles to which they have agreed. This holds risk for the organization given that private companies may be utilizing the WEPs and linkages with UN Women to promote themselves, leading to a perceived endorsement of their business practices by UN Women.

Given that it has been a recognized challenge with WEPs, in 2022 WEA developed a platform on WEPs.org to facilitate progress reporting by WEPs signatories, and UN Women headquarters is working on a "WEPs 2.0" plan to support recognition, auditing and certification schemes. However, UN Women personnel in the Asia and the Pacific region are still unclear about how it will work in practice. Nevertheless, stakeholders consulted, and the case studies highlight that the WEPs model has the most potential for sustainability given that it is a globally recognized and established normative framework, with processes such as the awards and targeted awareness-raising and capacity-building in place and ongoing collaboration with partners, national business networks as well as regional organizations. The draw for companies is clear: they receive recognition and publicity through the WEPs Awards and are able to further their own engagement and processes related to corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability policies and initiatives. However, timely follow-up, networking and sharing of good practices will be key for sustaining the interest and motivation of private sector companies. Given that EU-FPI funding for WEA is ending in 2022 and DFAT is funding WEPs for a limited time, identifying funding for ROAP to continue managing WEPs over the longer term would be strategic for sustaining and consolidating the significant gains to date.

**FIGURE 7: Key aspects of the WEPs model (part of WEA initiatives)**





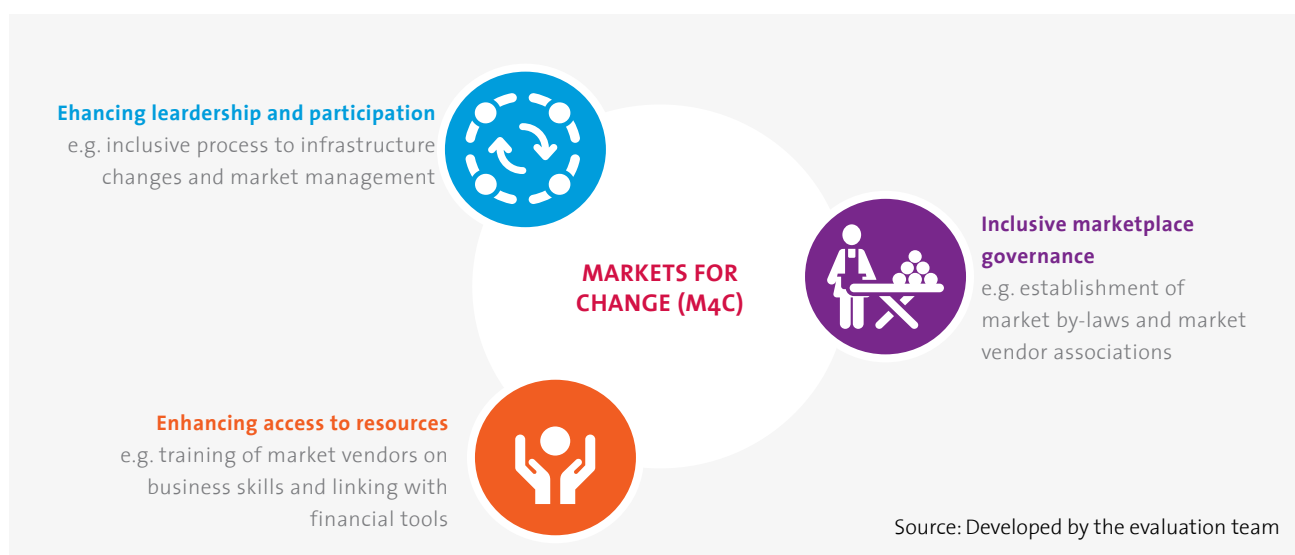
To ensure sustainability, including environmental sustainability, strengthening monitoring of at minimum a cohort of WEPs signatories will be necessary to test how monitoring, reporting and accountability can best be put in place. In addition, sharing information on how WEPs signatories are employing the principles is key to inspire others. It is important to capture not only good practices but also challenges and how these might be overcome. WEPs opens the door to multiple avenues of potential collaboration with the private sector. Moving forward, work remains to be done in strengthening networks, developing WEPs implementation tools, advocating the business case and strengthening policy efforts to link workplace and marketplace dimensions of women's economic empowerment that lead to benefits for working women across the informal and formal economy spectrum, including the most marginalized within these groups. Contributions to gender-responsive business approaches could be made through partnerships with larger agencies and UNCT joint programming work at country level. UN Women can highlight the potential WEPs creates for working with local partners to interact with companies on WEPs implementation. UN Women could help spearhead supply chain linkages and connections between WEPs signatory companies/corporate sector and women-owned SMEs.

### Markets for Change model

A combination of implementation strategies was undertaken as part of Markets for Change in Fiji, which included capacitating market vendors to improve their business skills, ensuring that their voices are represented in decision-making processes including with regards to improving market infrastructure to make it safer and more accessible for vulnerable groups (see figure 8).<sup>72</sup> This support to ensure gender-equitable economic and socio-cultural empowerment of women market vendors has led to an overall enhancement of the market environment and contributed to the key outcomes of the theory of change: agency, access and an enabling environment.

A critical component of the Markets for Change project was the dedicated work to advancing the normative and policy work by partnering with the Government and creating linkages with market vendors and including them in the consultation process. This has fostered sustainability potential for gender-responsive marketplaces.

**FIGURE 8 : Key aspects of Markets for Change model (implementation in Fiji)**



<sup>72</sup> UN Women's Internal Audit Service in its 2022 audit report for Fiji Multi-Country Office, and drawing on other previous audit evidence, found that UN Women did not have sufficient formal policies and processes in place for conducting and monitoring infrastructure projects. The audit recommended that headquarters develop policy and process outlining if, when and how to conduct infrastructure work at UN Women.

### 1. Establishing an inclusive marketplace governance

- Increasing representation of women market vendors in decision-making processes supporting agency:
- 12 out of the 13 marketplaces have established and registered their MVA as a result of the continuous awareness-raising, remote training and technical support provided to market vendors.
- In all MVAs, at least 50 per cent of the leadership roles are held by women.
- Networking and collective bargaining through MVAs has increased inclusion of vendors in decision-making processes such as by-law review and infrastructure decisions.

### 2. Enhancing opportunities for leadership and participation:

- Market vendors attended workshops on leadership, ethics, governance and communication. Vendors consulted by the evaluation noted feeling confident after attending workshops on communications and leadership skills. Some vendors also reported better communication with customers and an increase in their ability to voice opinions and engage in decision-making process with the market management.
- A market observation tool (Annex 5.4) that was used to observe infrastructure facilities in four markets provided evidence of the presence of infrastructure facilities such as gender-segregated washrooms, pavement, securely fenced market sheds, accommodation centres, resource centres and expanded market space.
- Markets were well connected with public transport, which enhanced the ability of market vendors to attend training.
- Market facilities were disability friendly, with the presence of wheelchair ramps, signage and accessible toilets.

### 3. Enhancing access to resources:

- Market vendors attended workshops on finance processes, accountability, gender, customer services, bookkeeping, conflict management and negotiation, digital literacy and organic agriculture.
- Market vendors consulted by the evaluation noted that participation in these trainings was high and found them to be of good quality. For example, some participants of the financial literacy training reported increase in information on how to access loans/credit/micro-finance.

To ensure maximum participation and representation of vulnerable groups, especially of rural women and casual vendors within the market, there is further need for new and proposed by-laws to be explained in vernacular languages. This will also promote awareness on market issues and help to create a strong sense of ownership when introduced. On market infrastructure, market vendors and management consulted gave the feedback that there was further scope to ensure that infrastructure is disaster resilient, especially in terms of proper drainage systems to prevent flooding, and that such systems are properly maintained to ensure that they are functioning as designed in times of need. Going forward, market vendors will need consistent support through different types of training adopted by the project.

There is a need to establish partnerships with market management for scaling up and sustaining of these training efforts. Within this integrated model described above, UN Women needs to identify its niche more clearly as a convenor and coordinator together with its normative role to empower women rather than engaged in the delivery of services or overseeing the subcontracting of these with respect to construction and maintenance of infrastructure. For the model to be more effective and sustainable, UN Women will need to seek partnerships with other agencies and organizations in the further development of the model and its design and implementation.

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY**

How did UN Women identify and engage the most marginalized groups within the context of private sector engagement for women's economic empowerment in Asia and the Pacific? Are there any unintended results or contributions towards transformative change?

**FINDING 10**

**While efforts in the informal sector in many cases target the most marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities and transgender women, the linkages between the informal and formal sectors and marginalized groups within them are not always clear. There is often a lack of clarity on targeting strategies that define who is being reached and how they are being engaged in adherence with the principle to leave no one behind.**

The analysis of evaluations and the portfolio review have provided evidence that most Women's Economic Empowerment programmes in the Asia and the Pacific region were conceived with a gender analysis (e.g., Economic Empowerment of Women Home-Based Workers and Excluded Groups in Pakistan and the Safe Cities and Safe Public Transport Programme in Papua New Guinea). Country Offices such as Nepal have gone further by integrating a framework<sup>73</sup> within their theory of change as part of their women's economic empowerment strategy and adopting a diversity and inclusion strategy.<sup>74</sup> Country Office efforts are targeting marginalized groups in many cases. In Pakistan, for example, UN Women aimed to support the economic empowerment of women home-based workers and other excluded groups, including women with disabilities and transgender women,<sup>75</sup> who are among the most persecuted groups. Their political, social and economic exclusion exposes them to systemic violence, abuse, neglect and discrimination.

However, there is opportunity for efforts towards women's economic empowerment to enhance engagement of marginalized groups. In China, for instance, the 2021 evaluation of the Women's Access to Equal Employment and Leadership Programme (2017–2020) found that the programme did not give attention to vulnerable and marginalized women's groups outside the programme. In consultations with market vendors in Fiji, it was expressed that vendors who travel from rural areas were often neglected in marketplace governance processes and decision-making mechanisms. Training on financial literacy, record-keeping and business skills was sometimes held in English rather than local languages, which further limited the scope of participation of market vendors.

Furthermore, efforts were not consistently reporting disaggregated data on vulnerable groups such as women with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals and ethnic minorities. This has made it difficult to identify the extent to which marginalized groups were reached.

The WEA programme design did not include an explicit strategy identifying how it would integrate an intersectional lens or work towards empowering marginalized groups, which several consulted stakeholders identified as a missed opportunity. Overall, the main target group of entrepreneurs was women-led SMEs. The WEA team noted that they intended to reach marginalized groups through the women-led SMEs given that they would be employed through the women-led SMEs. While several Industry Disruptor participants partnered with or trained local marginalized women, such as women artisans from rural areas, survivors of human trafficking and persons with disabilities, the entrepreneurs themselves did not include women from underserved and under resourced backgrounds, and training was mostly held in English.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, there is limited information on these groups of individuals, what vulnerabilities or marginalization they have experienced and how they have benefited from programming efforts. While the programme cannot reach all groups, there are other ways of embedding the principle within the pathways for change. An intersectional lens is important even within SMEs, where discrimination based on gender, sexuality, class or caste, race and ethnicity, etc. could further compound challenges to an entrepreneur's access to resources and financing and stifle opportunities.

<sup>73</sup> <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>.

<sup>74</sup> Strategy on Women's Economic Empowerment: 2019–2021. UN Women Nepal Country Office. Policy on Diversity and Inclusion updated in 2021.

<sup>75</sup> It is to be noted that in Pakistan, it is not yet accurate to refer to the entire LGBTQI+ community. Transgender people in Pakistan were recognized as a third gender on 4 November 2009 by a landmark ruling in the Supreme Court. This recognition of transgender persons is the foundation to realize the equal human rights and dignity for transgender people in Pakistan. Pakistan's 1973 Constitution guarantees the fundamental human rights of its citizens without discrimination of gender, sex, religion, caste and creed. However, the transgender community has a long history of facing deep-rooted stigma and social exclusion.

<sup>76</sup> The majority of the entrepreneurs interviewed had received higher-level university degrees and were middle-high income.

Capturing the experience of these groups, their priorities and ways to ensure that they are not marginalized is fundamental to women's economic empowerment efforts. While the WEA programme theory of change does not explicitly refer to marginalized groups, some efforts were made to reach out to these groups.

WEA reported that in Thailand, LGBTQI+ groups were invited to participate in dialogues on diversifying the supply chain of businesses, and people with disabilities joined the Industry Disruptor in India.<sup>77</sup>

## FINDING 11

### **UN Women broadly addresses social norms change through women's economic empowerment, yet there is a need to clearly define the norms and related indicators for measurement and strategies and resources to address these norms over the long term to understand what works and assess progress in Asia and the Pacific.**

Almost half (44 per cent) of UN Women women's economic empowerment projects (as of 2019) in the region were either directly or indirectly engaging women's organizations and the private sector (including women entrepreneurs, companies and private recruitment agencies) to tackle discriminatory social norms, practices and legislation and support women's active participation and leadership in the economy. As noted under previous findings, much progress has been made through the momentum building around WEPs, advocacy around policy change, and efforts to influence entrepreneurs. However, the portfolio analysis identified that the time frame for these projects in the region on average is short, i.e., approximately 2.5 years,<sup>78</sup> and efforts to transform the public perception of women's economic empowerment has been piecemeal and difficult to track for the more recent engagement of UN Women with the private sector.

Transforming unequal gender power relations in the workplace and marketplace requires long-term time frames and engaging men as agents of change. While projects often recognize this need, in practice the participation of men (either as beneficiaries, mentors or champions) could be strengthened. Only 34 per cent of the total number of recent projects (as of 2019) explicitly target attitudinal change amongst men and boys.<sup>79</sup>

#### **Steps to engage the private sector to tackle social norms through diverse advocacy and communications strategies have potential to multiply reach and create awareness on barriers to women's economic empowerment.**

Women's economic empowerment efforts across the region have sensitized companies and tried to mobilize support for women-owned SMEs through diverse advocacy and communications. Responding to the COVID-19 crisis, the #WomenRiseAboveCovid campaign was launched by WEA in March 2020 to promote the acknowledgement, engagement and empowerment of women in business and essential sectors on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response. In India, the Country Office partnered with the private sector to challenge harmful stereotyped gender portrayals in advertising and the media through the Unstereotype Alliance.<sup>80</sup> The region's first-ever virtual event, Ring the Bell for Gender Equality, underscored the business case for women's leadership, women's economic empowerment and transparency and accountability of business action. High-level dialogues such as the Unpaid Care Alliance Roundtable and the United Nations Virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights in Asia and the Pacific (which UN Women co-organized with UNDP and other partners) were leveraged to raise awareness and mobilize action by the private sector on women's economic empowerment and addressing gendered social norms related to unpaid care, which is one of the major barriers to female labour force participation and women's leadership in business.

<sup>77</sup> However, numbers of individuals disaggregated by marginalization were not reported.

<sup>78</sup> The 27 projects (excluding Centre of Excellence and counting M4C as a single project spanning across three countries) implemented as of 2019 had a total duration of 811 months (67.5 years), which is approximately 2.5 years per project.

<sup>79</sup> These projects include the WeCare project (UN Women China Country Office) and the Women's Empowerment for Inclusive Growth (WING) project (UN Women Bangladesh Country Office), which aim to create public awareness of unpaid care work. The Women's Empowerment and Resilient Inclusive Communities in Rakhine programme in Myanmar proposes to conduct outreach with male leaders and youth to raise awareness about barriers to women's economic empowerment. The United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (Strengthening Economic Resilience and Food Security for Women Home-Based Workers and Women Farmers) in Pakistan included media campaigns focusing on sensitizing men to the increased responsibilities of women during COVID-19 lockdowns.

<sup>80</sup> Bhushan, R. 2021. "United Nations Women launches India chapter of Unstereotype Alliance", Economic Times, 30 March 2021. Accessed from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/advertising/united-nations-women-launches-india-chapter-of-unstereotype-alliance/articleshow/81763055.cms?from=mdr>.

The WEA and Safe and Fair projects have also teamed up to support a regional campaign against gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work, which acknowledges that this violence occurs because of the discriminatory social norms and structures that reinforce power inequalities based on gender.<sup>81</sup>

Measuring social norms change is challenging, and UN Women is making progress on this front with the new UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–2025, which introduced a new outcome on social norms change.

This will open doors to the development of indicators and guidance for the organization that the Regional Office can adapt as appropriate to the region and support Country Offices with implementation. This will facilitate tracking of efforts and contribute to building an evidence base on what works and how UN Women is influencing social norms change.

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**81** ILO. 2017. Violence and Harassment against Women and Men in the World of Work-Trade Union Perspective and Action. Accessed from: [https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS\\_546645/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS_546645/lang--en/index.htm).

**ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY**

How well are UN Women's human and financial resources at regional level in Asia and the Pacific used to support efficient regional- and country-level women's economic empowerment efforts?

**FINDING 12**

### The lack of core-funded technical support at the regional level and the need for more headquarters leadership and guidance during this period limited organizational efficiency in the Asia and the Pacific region.

As noted under Finding 2, UN Women stakeholders consulted noted that overall, there was limited guidance and support provided to the field on women's economic empowerment beyond that received by WEA. This situation may have been affected by a lengthy process to fill the headquarters position of Women's Economic Empowerment Chief in the UN Women's Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division (PPID).

At regional level, the absence of a dedicated Thematic Adviser resulted in the lack of systematic support to field presences beyond WEA and contributed to limited internal coherence (Finding 3). The Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area had one Programme Specialist (P-4) entirely funded by the WEA regional programme (non-core), a P-3 Migration Programme Specialist (non-core) and, for a limited time, a National Programme Specialist (SB-5) on a service contract. The WEA Programme Specialist had to dedicate her time to project management, significantly limiting capacity to provide field offices with strategic guidance and technical support or to facilitate knowledge exchange (beyond private sector engagement in WEA countries), and cater to the demands for support on the broader Women's Economic Empowerment portfolio in the region (see Finding 2). This is an issue that has been identified in other thematic areas of ROAP.<sup>82</sup> As a result, ROAP is moving towards an approach of core funding for regional advisers during the new Strategic Note 2022–2025.

Production of knowledge and tools that are timely and relevant for advocacy and training purposes is a key strategy for advancing women's economic empowerment in the region.

The WEA project alone produced 59 publications since 2019 (including research, policy briefs and a training curriculum).<sup>83</sup> While UN Women personnel consulted noted that there were good-quality knowledge products and tools developed, they also noted that the lack of an ROAP-supported community of practice and facilitation of regular exchanges between countries (outside of WEA) was an area for attention. UN Women personnel working on women's economic empowerment (outside of the WEA countries) sought leadership from ROAP to facilitate learning and guidance based on approaches implemented across the region. However, there was no regional framework or plan for production of knowledge products across ROAP or the region. With a joint plan, ROAP could pool funds across projects (or even within project components), invest in joint production of knowledge products, ensure products are developed and used across teams, and divert funds from the production of new products towards sharing and facilitating the use of the products developed. This could also help contribute to the codification and implementation of models across the region (i.e., WeRise). ROAP has proposed the establishment of a knowledge management position during the Strategic Note 2022–2025, which could help facilitate this approach.

The analysis of evaluations<sup>84</sup> identified the need to strengthen the programmatic approach, ensuring synergies between projects or project components and that partners are leveraged. For example, in Pakistan, the home-based workers project could have enhanced linkages between the two project partners through knowledge exchange sessions or joint activities, which could have enhanced synergies and cross-project learning specific to disability inclusive approaches.

<sup>82</sup> UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific internal audit 2019, Evaluation of UN Women contributions to Women, Peace and Security 2021.

<sup>83</sup> The evaluation team analysed the WEA knowledge products based on a list of 59 knowledge products provided to the team in February 2022. The WEA team, as of finalizing this report, noted that this list has now been expanded to include a total of 158 knowledge products.

<sup>84</sup> The Women's Economic Empowerment in Nepal evaluation, the Home-Based Workers in Pakistan evaluation and the Viet Nam Country Portfolio Evaluation.

In Nepal, women's economic empowerment efforts were implemented in the same area by different partners contracted by the CO. However, there was lack of information sharing reducing prospects for building networks, complimentary interventions, and learning.

This evaluation reviewed a sample of WEA project partner contracts<sup>85</sup>: 13 contracts with 6 partners were analyzed by the evaluation team, which represented 47 per cent (US\$1.39 million of US\$2.9 million) of the total budget at regional level dedicated to the WEA programme (including the components related to the Care Accelerator, the Industry Disruptor, WeRise, the WEPs Activator and WEPs management). On the one hand, engaging 6 partners brought different expertise and networks, may have allowed for more innovation by testing different approaches and also spreads the risk across multiple partners. On the other hand, partnering with fewer partners could have potentially led to a more streamlined approach, reduced transaction costs around knowledge production and capacity-building efforts, ensured learning and synergies across the different efforts, and potentially identified opportunities for resources to go more directly to participants rather than to implementing partners.

Of the six partners that were included in the sample noted above, only one has headquarters based in the Asia and the Pacific region.<sup>86</sup> The approach of contracting European partners brought in an element of sharing innovations between the EU and the Asia and the Pacific region, as envisioned in the design. While there were some instances of co-creation of tools with local partners such as WeRise in Indonesia, more can be done to encourage the responsible partner to work more with local partners at country level, thereby building local capacity. For example, in the case of Malaysia a local implementing partner, Lead Women was contracted to support the WEPs activator. Organizations and firms with gender expertise on women's economic empowerment have knowledge of local laws, social norms and languages as well as connections with networks in both the public and private sectors. The analysis of evaluations also identified the need to ensure mutually beneficial partnership approach rather than just engaging partners to carry out activities. This approach would entail co-creation and empowering local partners to take the lead; this could highlight their expertise and in turn build the capacity of others, contributing to local ownership and sustainability of achievements.

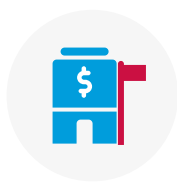
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**85** The partners with the highest expenditures were identified through Atlas expenditure report March 2022. These were also the partners responsible for the capacity development initiatives.

**86** The WEA team noted that most partners had satellite offices in the region.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The evaluation team identified the following lessons based on the programmes reviewed for this evaluation that have significance beyond UN Women:



**Engagement with the private sector to achieve women's economic empowerment requires long-term investment:** Companies need to receive a clear message and evidence of how engagement on gender equality and women's economic empowerment is beneficial to their bottom line or business outcomes. It is important to reach out to more national business organizations in addition to women's business organizations as vehicles to institutionalize and scale up the women's economic empowerment agenda in the private sector overall. Teaming up with local implementing partners to deliver training, advocacy efforts, follow-up and monitoring can be effective for building national capacity and sustaining momentum and interest.



**As there are many actors engaged in entrepreneurship training efforts, partnerships are critical for an organization such as UN Women to achieve relevance, coherence and scalability:** In the entrepreneurship space, UN Women niche is providing a gender-responsive entrepreneurship lens, but without partners to achieve scale, these efforts will remain small-scale. It is important to see women entrepreneurs not only as recipients of support but as catalysts for more inclusive business conduct and providers of opportunities for women, particularly marginalized groups, in their value chains.



**Where support to entrepreneurs is given, linkages with financing must be prioritized:** While women have accessed skills and knowledge through women's entrepreneurship activities, their access to financing and markets has often been limited, due to discrimination and gender stereotyping. To follow up on training for entrepreneurs and a period of application of the skills acquired, agencies and implementing partners need to link trainees to local financing institutions, IFIs or company supply chains.



**There is opportunity to build on the momentum generated around the care economy, but it requires a comprehensive approach:** The need to address women's disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work so that measures to increase their participation in the labour force and economic empowerment are more effective is evident and paramount. Building a care economy in terms of expanding an economic sector that will respond to care needs, create and sustain care enterprises and services, open employment opportunities for women as well as men, and contribute to overall economic growth requires a comprehensive approach across both public and private sectors. Building on the momentum in this area can contribute to broader efforts across organizations and agencies to address the above-mentioned elements in a holistic manner.



**Effective application of the leave no one behind principle requires programmatic efforts to be explicit about who, how and why:** Identifying target groups of women for entrepreneurship training and services for start-ups and business expansion requires consideration of their social and economic environment, e.g., urban or rural, informal or formal sector, micro-enterprises or SMEs, more disadvantaged/marginalized or with some level of empowerment (education, etc.). Programmes for engaging with the private sector also need to consider how to link efforts between the informal and formal sectors to sustain results for wider segments of the population and groups who are the most marginalized within society. Given the UN Women principle to leave no one behind, it is important to be explicit about the selection of profiles and link this to how directly or indirectly broader groups in society may or may not benefit. Engaging local companies or organizations with links to the most marginalized groups can help to foster culturally appropriate approaches.





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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The presentation of the preliminary findings and discussion on the way forward took place with members of the Internal Evaluation Reference Group in May 2022 and informed the final recommendations presented below. The recommendations were reviewed by the Evaluation Management and Reference Groups, and subsequent changes were integrated as appropriate. The suggested key actions for consideration should be determined based on feasibility within the current programme of work and available resources. Some of the suggested actions were already under way given the time lag between the issuance of the preliminary findings and the finalization of the report. The level of priority and suggested time frame for implementation are indicated below the recommendation. Feedback from the Evaluation Management and Reference Groups on factual errors in the evaluation report was tracked for transparency.

There is an urgent need to accelerate women's economic empowerment. The COVID-19 pandemic has rolled back hard-fought gains and worsened inequalities. Investing in this critical area will pay dividends for women's empowerment and the progress of society overall. Women's Economic Empowerment is a fundamental area of focus for UN Women, and it cuts across other thematic areas as a means for achievement. UN Women has a clear mandate and credibility based on its extensive engagement with civil society, the women's movement and marginalized and disadvantaged groups of women. However, it is still building its expertise and credibility in the broader women's economic empowerment space. There are many actors in the space, many with more resources and human capacity than UN Women. This

points to the need for more internal dialogue within the region on an effective strategy that articulates how UN Women will collaborate with partners working in the same space. This necessitates UN Women understanding where its investments will have the biggest impact and clearly defining its niche within this space and building expertise in line with a long-term strategy.

Private sector engagement is fundamental in this journey, and UN Women plays a critical convening role between the private sector, government, civil society, trade unions and business networks and organizations. UN Women must uphold its commitment to human rights and ensure that the principle of leaving no one behind is clearly integrated in its engagement with the private sector. This also necessitates linkages between informal and formal sectors and within each sector, identifying intersecting forms of discrimination and barriers to advancement for the most marginalized groups of women and strategies to addressing them. Social norms change is fundamental to making progress in women's economic empowerment with a view to working across the individual, systemic, formal and informal levels to stimulate transformative change. It will require UN Women to leverage its expertise in research and data, generation and dissemination of knowledge products, advocacy and holistic approaches to capacity-building of actors to influence policy changes to build an enabling environment that supports implementation of gender-responsive practices at all levels. It will also necessitate clarifying how synergies across thematic areas will be leveraged and identifying opportunities where UN Women could be positioning for the future (i.e., Green Economy).

## RELEVANCE &amp; COHERENCE:

## CONCLUSION 1



Based on findings

1-4

**Women's economic empowerment is a high priority in the Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a region vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, which has increased vulnerability, the burden of care, decreased women's participation in the formal economy and resulted in loss of income. Stakeholders look to UN Women for expertise and leadership to drive the agenda on women's economic empowerment with its coordination mandate and gender expertise. While the ROAP focus on the formal private sector is a critical and strategic priority within the region, the broader priorities for advancing women's economic empowerment across the region need to be better reflected.**

UN Women's niche on women's economic empowerment in the Asia and the Pacific region is still being defined. Corporately, there has been a leadership gap on Women's Economic Empowerment with the lack of a thematic lead at headquarters due to a long vacancy of the Chief position, and without a dedicated Thematic Adviser, ROAP had to focus on project management, which limited its capacity to provide dedicated technical support or strategic guidance to field offices (beyond formal private sector engagement through WEA). Nevertheless, WEA contributed to advancing approaches on women's economic empowerment within the formal business sector that could be built upon and expanded beyond the seven WEA countries. While momentum was built during discussions on the theory of change of the new corporate Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the ongoing development of a regional strategy for Women's Economic Empowerment, these will need to be translated into coherent guidance for field offices.

One of UN Women's value added is its convening role, as it provides the potential to link the private sector with government and civil society and, via WEPs, link the United Nations with private companies through direct partnerships. By strategically utilizing WEPs as a framework for action, WEA provided an entry point to test innovative new approaches and move towards a blueprint for UN Women's formal private sector engagement. However, the next Strategic Note period will be essential to clarifying UN Women's value added within this space and how best to support private and public sector linkages.

ROAP has consulted with UN Women personnel in the region as input to a regional Women's Economic Empowerment strategy and is moving towards investing core resources in a Gender Economist position, which provides potential for ensuring a more robust and comprehensive thematic area of work. This will be critical for establishing a long-term vision and accompanying plan of action that captures the breadth and depth of priorities for advancing women's economic empowerment in the Asia and the Pacific region. In the short and medium terms, a realistic and systematic stocktaking of capacity and mandates to deliver on unique and complementary aspects of women's economic empowerment is important for building internal institutional expertise, a niche strategy, partnerships, visibility and credibility. Identifying and leveraging comparative advantages is key to this process.

Given that there are several other United Nations agencies with far greater resources working in women's economic empowerment, consideration needs to be given to the precise contribution of UN Women so as not to overstretch resources. UN Women should prioritize partnerships and consider where other actors have capacity to ensure scalability and sustainability. This would open the door for broadening and strengthening partnerships, for example with ministries of labour and industry, as well as with regional organizations such as ASEAN (where UN Women has a joint work plan that includes women's economic empowerment). In partnering with the United Nations system there is considerable potential to scale up, given UN Women's normative and convening roles and its strong research, data and advocacy work.

**RECOMMENDATION 1**

**Recognizing the ongoing ROAP Strategic Note process, finalize the draft long-term regional Women's Economic Empowerment strategy with a corresponding partnership and resource mobilization plan. The regional strategy should clearly articulate how UN Women will work with partners (particularly the United Nations system) to advance women's economic empowerment. The regional strategy needs to reflect core UN Women values (leave no one behind) and define how informal and formal sector linkages will be supported, the roles and specific niche expertise, and how interlinkages between thematic areas will be integrated.**

**Suggested key actions:**

- Using the field office survey results, undertake a scan of regional- and country-level plans to identify synergies and how ROAP can support Country Offices to ensure that it facilitates two-way connections with them as well as between the offices aimed at knowledge exchange and partnerships.
- Differentiate the approach to women's economic empowerment in middle-income countries versus lower income countries (which may be also relevant for other thematic areas) and informal/formal sectors.
- Undertake a mapping to determine who is doing what in similar women's economic empowerment areas and discuss with United Nations partners (as a priority) and others to identify complementary and value-added actions and plans in the short and longer terms and agree on entry points for joint work.
- Invest in joint UNCT programmes on gender equality and women's economic empowerment at the country level for coordinated delivery of services to beneficiaries and strengthen advocacy efforts for social norms and policy change with governments and private sector actors.
- Engage with donors to ensure resources to implement the identified regional, multi-country and country priorities and continue to prioritize core resources for catalytic work related to women's economic empowerment at field level.

**Targeted stakeholders:** ROAP Management and Women's Economic Empowerment Team

Priority  
**HIGH**

Timeframe  
**Q4 2022**

**EFFECTIVENESS & SUSTAINABILITY****CONCLUSION 2**

*Based on findings*

**5-9**

**UN Women has mobilized private sector actors across the Asia and the Pacific region and furthered the implementation of women's economic empowerment measures at the workplace and in the marketplace. A holistic and integrated approach to women's economic empowerment, where efforts focus on policy and action by both the public and private sectors, the identification of synergies between the informal and formal sectors, and work with partners to influence transformation towards more gender equal societies, is where efforts by UN Women have proven to be most effective, with higher potential for scale-up and sustainability.**

UN Women has proven its ability to stimulate and work with organizations of women at the grass roots, empowering them to realize their voice and agency, shifting power dynamics within the marketplace and linking this with institutional and policy change. Delivering direct services (e.g., training women entrepreneurs) with limited resources to small and scattered beneficiary groups of individual women without partnerships that allow for scale and sustainability may divert or weaken capacity-building efforts needed for policy and normative change.

Mobilization of individual private sector actors without a long-term strategy and plan risks losing momentum when project funds are no longer available. New projects may support the continuation of some aspects, albeit with a new set of cohorts, thus running the risk of repeating a cycle of limited follow-up for individual project participants. Women's economic empowerment efforts need to look towards linking women with access to financial assets, social finance and investors in addition to facilitating access to a wide range of skills over the longer term for women's businesses to grow and for women to move into the digitized world.

A next step is communicating what works, codification of these good practice models, identification of resources for scaling up and linking these with advocacy for relevant policy change. This can be done through wider sharing with UN Women Multi-Country Offices, Country Offices and field presences, business networks, government actors and development partners. Ensuring sustainability requires building ownership and institutionalization of women's economic empowerment efforts in private sector organizations and networks as well as in State entities. Legislative and policy changes of governments are also potential instruments of ownership and sustainability, though the challenge of implementation may remain if there is not continuous support for and mobilization of stakeholders.

UN Women has increased visibility on women's economic empowerment through the WEPs approach and has a critical role to play in building on WEPs momentum and supporting the private sector in WEPs implementation through the eco-system approach. The creation of WEPs platforms in countries supported by women's business organizations and company networks also provides avenues for sustainability. Resource mobilization to expand WEPs support at field level – beyond the current WEA countries – will be critical and ensure a consistent approach. More needs to be done to strengthen accountability and networks in this area so that private sector actors can learn and encourage each other and contribute to broader social and cultural change.

Delivering direct services (e.g., training women entrepreneurs) with limited resources to small and scattered beneficiary groups of individual women without partnerships that allow for scale and sustainability may divert or weaken capacity-building efforts needed for policy and normative change. Mobilization of individual private sector actors without a long-term strategy and plan risks losing momentum when project funds are no longer available.

New projects may support the continuation of some aspects, albeit with a new set of cohorts, thus running the risk of repeating a cycle of limited follow-up for individual project participants. Women's economic empowerment efforts need to look towards linking women with access to financial assets, social finance and investors in addition to facilitating access to a wide range of skills over the longer term for women's businesses to grow and for women to move into the digitized world.

UN Women also has an important role to play in emerging areas of common interest such as the care economy, gender-responsive procurement, and closing the digital divide. Strong partnerships will increase the potential for scaling gender-responsive and inclusive approaches to women's economic empowerment and accelerate progress for gender equality.

Recognizing that United Nations agencies, IFIs as well as other organizations have strong mandates for gender equality, gender mainstreaming and delivering on the SDGs, more efforts on United Nations joint programming are needed to combine dispersed women's economic empowerment resources across agencies to achieve improved and more sustainable outcomes for human rights and gender equality. UN Women's leadership to spearhead partnerships can contribute to delivering more and better results for gender equality and women's economic empowerment and strengthen UN Women's reach to larger segments of marginalized women. Together with maintaining and strengthening UN Women's longstanding interaction with civil society and women's organizations, this approach could generate strategic entry points for UN Women to exert greater influence on the creation of an enabling policy environment for human rights and gender equality.

**RECOMMENDATION 2**

**As part of the new regional Women’s Economic Empowerment strategy, codify UN Women programming models along the informal/formal private sector spectrum, emphasizing linkages between private sector engagement and policy change, establishing partnerships and facilitating exchange on available knowledge products and lessons learned so that the models can be a catalyst for women’s economic empowerment.**

**Suggested key actions:**

- Define how UN Women will:
- Support and sustain WEPs (in line with the corporate approach moving towards enhanced accountability). Continue investing in WEPs awardees and building an influencer/training of trainers approach (adapted to local context). Build and use evidence on the business case for advocacy efforts. Ensure follow-up with WEPs awardees and signatories, sharing tools and inviting participation in a monitoring exercise.
- Leverage the convening role of UN Women by establishing platforms or tapping into networks that bring together the private sector, business networks and government to identify entry points for joint advocacy on key policy asks.
- Identify partnerships (United Nations, IFIs, non-governmental organizations, academia, private sector, etc.), leveraging the expertise of others through building strategic and long-term partnerships. Identify how UN Women can partner with established training initiatives for greater reach and a more sustainable approach to follow-up, where linkages with financing opportunities are embedded. A network analysis can help support where efforts would be multiplied.
- Focus on strengthening and leveraging UN Women’s niche: research, data, knowledge exchange and advocacy to link efforts with normative and policy change, and their implementation.
- Invest in building UN Women internal expertise in key areas such as private sector engagement (especially in non-WEA countries), macroeconomic policy analysis, gender-lens investing, gender-responsive procurement and the care economy.

**Targeted stakeholders:** ROAP Management and Women’s Economic Empowerment Team

Priority

**MEDIUM**

Timeframe

**Q3 2023**

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY****CONCLUSION 3**

*Based on findings*

**10 & 11**

**UN Women in the Asia and the Pacific region is not consistently integrating an explicit approach to identification and engagement of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, in its Women’s Economic Empowerment efforts or how partners will be engaged to support social norms change to implement this approach. Embodying the principle of leave no one behind and developing tools to support implementation can produce ripple effects towards transformative change.**

An enabling environment for women in the private sector must encompass an enabling environment for all women. A consistent and concerted effort to design a regional strategy for Women’s Economic Empowerment, explicitly integrating the principle to leave no one behind and a rights-based approach, is needed to better understand how it can be operationalized and what it means in different country contexts. While Country Office efforts are targeting the most marginalized groups in many cases, more data is needed on the actual reach and benefits to these groups. On the other hand, the WEA project targeted middle-income countries as well the “missing middle” of women-owned SMEs as strategic entry points for demonstrating gender-responsive business models.

How to link these different target groups in integrated programme approaches could be explored, for example, through the work on gender-responsive procurement. Efforts to expand and increase the income of women-led SMEs could promote their inclusion in supply chains of large companies, including MNEs. In turn, these SMEs could be mobilized to employ and source products and services from the more disadvantaged women in the community. Similarly, efforts to reduce the disproportionate share of women in unpaid care work could target more marginalized women to gain access to decent work and income (including in the care economy itself), through improved access to and availability of affordable child and elder care.

However, there is a need for ROAP to enhance its targeting strategy and intersectional approaches to ensure diversity in terms of who is being reached within the private sector. This strategy should not only look externally at programme target groups, but also internally at whom UN Women is engaging as implementing/responsible parties. It is important that UN Women leads by example in its own procurement practices by engaging partners that are based in the countries it is serving and representative of diverse groups, including persons with disabilities.

This will not only support the principle of leaving no one behind but will also support efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability.

Better integration of environmental sustainability into efforts is also important, including being mindful of which companies are engaged and the messages implied. A more concerted strategy around how social norms change will be integrated across programming efforts is under way, and this will entail the engagement of more male champions to influence policy change in the private and public sectors.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

**Develop an integrated approach to leaving no one behind by ensuring internal capacity to apply this lens in the programmatic cycle, engage partners that are led by or representative of marginalized groups and develop practical tools to support these efforts.**

#### Suggested key actions:

- Over the course of the next Strategic Note, strengthen the ROAP approach to leaving no one behind and influencing social norms change in a strategic, systematic manner. Establish a common approach to analysis, identification, meaningful engagement and tracking of who (marginalized groups) is being reached (which can be adopted by Country Offices) and how they are or are not benefiting. This should apply to actions that both programme and operations can take. Develop tools to operationalize this in practical terms (i.e., integrate as part of partner capacity assessment).
- Conduct regular reviews led by ROAP to support enhanced follow-up and accountability.
- Ensure systematic integration of environmental sustainability into women's economic empowerment approaches with a view to assessing how they contribute to transformative change.
- In emerging areas of concern, clearly identify and advocate the linkages between UN Women's work with private sector actors and its mandate to leave no one behind.

**Targeted stakeholders:** ROAP Management; Women's Economic Empowerment team; Planning, Monitoring and Operations teams

Priority  
**MEDIUM**

Timeframe  
**Q3 2023**

## ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY

## CONCLUSION 4



Based on finding

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**Investment in governance structures and staffing that support the functions envisioned for the Regional Office with respect to supporting field offices in key thematic areas could enhance efficiency.**

Organizational efficiency is important, not only for the successful and timely delivery of projects and programmes, but also for their effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The lack of a regional Thematic Adviser for women's economic empowerment and few dedicated Country Office thematic leads in this area resulted in insufficient attention to a community of practice where knowledge management and exchange across the region could be useful for ensuring the use of knowledge products and scaling up or replication of innovative and effective approaches.

Adequate human resources capacity to build institutional knowledge is also key for organizational efficiency over the longer term. This requires that staff for thematic areas such as Women's Economic Empowerment be supported by core budgets for programme design, monitoring, knowledge management and resource mobilization.

Regional projects, such as WEA, are an important avenue for including countries that are unable to attract resources for particular areas of work (e.g., private sector engagement) and testing innovative approaches that have scale-up potential. Such projects have potential to contribute to and share knowledge products and tools with a wider pool of stakeholders.

Ensuring a comprehensive plan for production of knowledge products, tools and training materials can enhance their longevity and use in future projects. Using and adapting them in future projects can allow more resources to be allocated to advocacy and partnerships efforts rather than developing new materials. Communities of practice are essential for internal learning and building and institutionalizing expertise in key areas. Lessons learned from the implementation of diverse women's economic empowerment activities in the region are valuable for scaling up policy-level influence.

## RECOMMENDATION 4

**Invest core and other resources in building ROAP's technical capacity on Women's Economic Empowerment to fulfil its regional functions related to policy advisory, technical and capacity building support on country programming.**

## Suggested key actions:

- Continue with the plan to invest core funding in a position to provide leadership of the broader Women's Economic Empowerment thematic area, such as the proposed Gender Economist position or a dedicated Technical Adviser with expertise in broader women's economic empowerment such as macroeconomic policy. If a Gender Economist is engaged, it should be clear how this position will be merged with the Women's Economic Empowerment area of work (and collaborate with other areas). This will be essential for feeding into a broad regional strategy for women's economic empowerment and building partnerships to carry this vision forward. Ideally, resources would also be identified or mobilized to fund a team to implement the regional strategy.
- As part of ROAP efforts to strengthen knowledge management, establish an internal region-wide plan for publications and events, identifying opportunities for jointly (across thematic teams or field offices) developed products/events (saving time, money and leveraging partners across thematic areas to multiply reach) and building knowledge-sharing and social media approaches accordingly. Developing a regional flagship publication to which all teams can contribute (i.e., regional "progress of women") could be a way of jointly generating and sharing knowledge products.
- Invest in building a community of practice and internal capacity-building of women's economic empowerment focal points.
- Encourage a value for money analysis. The ROAP should create a checklist or tool to be included when assessing partner agreements at regional level and identify how to invest in partnerships in the region to build economical and sustainable approaches.

**Targeted stakeholders:** ROAP Management; Women's Economic Empowerment team; Planning, Monitoring and Operations teams

Priority  
**HIGH**

Timeframe  
**Q4 2022**

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TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON  
MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.**

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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