

Forum for South East European Women Entrepreneurs
Istanbul, 21 - 22 September 2010

Joint statement

The first Forum for South East European Women Entrepreneurs is held within the framework of the Chairmanship-in-Office of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECF) by the Republic of Turkey. The Forum which has been co-organized by the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Development Administration of Turkey (KOSGEB) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is a part of the project developed by the RCC and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) on promoting women entrepreneurs in SEE who intend to expand and/or innovate their activities.

This event is the first of what is intended to become a regular forum for dialogue and interaction among women entrepreneurs, women's business associations, government authorities, research institutions and NGOs, international experts and representatives of international organizations in the region of SEE.

While *networking* is an ever increasing success factor for entrepreneurs, networking opportunities remain limited for business women. Access to these networks is essential to develop business ideas, meet potential clients, suppliers, business partners and providers of finance, understand market developments and opportunities, and exchange strategic information, cooperation and support.

The policy environment, both formal and customary, remains a challenge in SEE. The creation of an enabling entrepreneurial climate and the adoption of relevant high technology are key prerequisites to unleashing entrepreneurship. Policy makers need to listen to the voice of entrepreneurs and address the obstacles they face.

Regulatory, institutional and policy making efforts in the region need to become more gender-sensitive. It will be of paramount importance to formulate a clear policy objective for the promotion of women entrepreneurship. Governments should take a proactive approach in adopting, implementing and monitoring positive measures for ensuring equal opportunities through policies that integrate the contribution of women into economic development such as increased employment opportunities, non-discrimination in the labor market, education and training, health, social and legal services, general awareness and communication, women friendly information packages, information campaigns targeting women in business, as well as their associations and networks, facilitated conditions for child-care, reducing the informal economy etc. It is important to ensure equality at all levels, while expanding work options and capacity of acting for women entrepreneurs.

Initiatives for *improving the data set and information* available on entrepreneurship of women innovators are indispensable to assess the scale of the problems and plan for adequate policy intervention. There needs to be better understanding of the crucial contribution of women entrepreneurs to economic growth and job creation through statistical information about women-owned enterprises. Statistical harmonization across the region and with the rest of the world is also important for the purpose of comparative analysis.

Beyond *equal access to capital* for women entrepreneurs, it remains important to raise awareness in the financial sector regarding financing of women entrepreneurs. Initiatives are needed for helping women to access venture capital, by providing financial training, financial capacity building, networking with

investors and other activities for bridging the gap between women entrepreneurs and financial stakeholders. In a context in which the venture capital market is still underdeveloped, public grants and guarantee funds are also a good way to support women's innovative entrepreneurship in the SEE, especially during the most difficult part of business start-up.

The entrepreneurial spirit comes from practice, in which knowledge is essential. The education system is an important tool for providing *entrepreneurial learning in life-long learning context*. Initiatives should aim at building women entrepreneurial capacity (i.e. mentoring and business training, management skills, technological know-how, access to markets and finance, specific support for developing business ideas), as well as at increasing personal skills (i.e. increasing women's confidence, leadership, capacity of taking risks). Because of their different backgrounds compared to men entrepreneurs, specific women-focused entrepreneurial learning should be carried out.

One of the most important ways that successful women can contribute to future generations is simply by being role models; by setting an example that other women can follow. We need more ordinary role models, who are not necessarily running multi-million euro corporations. The best role models are those who successfully provide for their lives and families, in a way that other women can relate to, while learning how to cope and deal with gender specific issues.

A regional approach to entrepreneurship is important in SEE. Entrepreneurs in general and women entrepreneurs in particular need to be able to operate in expanded markets. And growth for the business involves also looking beyond the borders of one's country or even neighboring countries. Given the size of the regional market and the globalization trend, it makes sense to think globally and seek to integrate and find our place in the global picture. There are already structures at regional level, e.g. Gender Task Force and SEE Entrepreneurial Learning Centre, as well as at national level, e.g. national women business associations and chambers of commerce, which provide a solid base to develop concrete projects supporting women entrepreneurship.

Women entrepreneurs from SEE can give a strong contribution to the development of the region. It takes courage, know-how and perseverance to launch a business and make it succeed. Women in the region are a powerful source of new ideas and perspectives that contribute positively to family, national and regional welfare.

The launching of the South East European Women Entrepreneurs Network coincides with the renewed emphasis by the European Commission on a more entrepreneurial Europe and on women's entrepreneurship, which is considered as a priority pillar within the recently launched EU 2020 as well as lately enacted European Small Business Act, in which policy alignment as well as efficient monitoring systems and support frameworks will provide more support for women's entrepreneurship. As the countries of the region move towards EU accession, we look up to the European Commission and EU member countries to contribute to this important regional initiative through their wealth of knowledge, expertise and resources.