

JAN. 29, 2021 - PIVOTING IN A PANDEMIC

#OneSouthAsia Conversations

A World Bank series exploring ideas for regional cooperation in economic connectivity, climate change, and human development

Pivoting in a Pandemic:

Women Entrepreneurs Tap Regional Opportunities

January 29, 2021



Left to right: Cecile Fruman, Anshula Kant, Maheen Adamjee.

Left to right: Ayanthi Gurusinghe, Sairee Chahal

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When COVID-19 shut primary schools throughout Pakistan early in 2020, entrepreneur [Maheen Adamjee](#) knew she had to act quickly to save her business.

[Dot & Line](#) provided in-home tutoring to Pakistani schoolchildren with a network of women micro-franchisees who used their homes as teaching centers. A national lockdown to contain the disease halted all in-person tutoring sessions. So in just two weeks, Dot & Line rewrote its business plan, created digital tools, and launched training classes to help franchisees shift to online tutoring sessions. The firm transformed itself into a digital company nearly overnight. Adamjee was one of three women entrepreneurs who shared their stories at the Jan. 29, 2021 #OneSouthAsia online conversation.

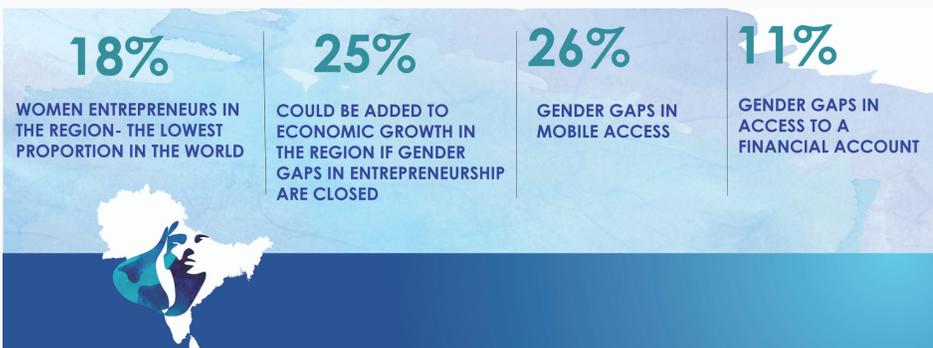
Nearly one year later, Dot & Line has expanded into several countries and continues to grow, driven by demand from the Pakistan diaspora. Adding women franchisees to keep up with new students isn't easy. "There are significant and very serious challenges facing our women teaching partners and us as a company," Adamjee said. For example, while nearly 90 million Pakistanis have mobile phone access, only 27% are women. Cultural traditions mean that many Pakistani women lack their own email account and bank account.

Women entrepreneurs like Adamjee are responding to COVID-19 with agility, creativity, and resilience, according to [Cecile Fruman](#), the World Bank's director for regional integration and engagement in South Asia. Lockdowns to control the pandemic hurt all businesses in the region. But some women-owned firms have rebounded by adopting new business models and using digital platforms to take advantage of emerging regional opportunities.

Exports bring better paying jobs for women

Fruman, who moderated the #OneSouthAsia Conversation, said the option to export products or services to other countries is important for women entrepreneurs. World Bank [research](#) found that firms trading with other countries tend to generate better paying jobs and more opportunities for women. "This region needs more women entrepreneurs and traders to drive a resilient recovery," Fruman said. COVID-19 has forced many companies to embrace digital platforms and tools, and that can be a plus for women-led businesses. "The Internet helps women entrepreneurs bypass traditional market access and trade barriers."

Women entrepreneurs in South Asia



Non-tariff barriers and restrictions have long hobbled trade within South Asia. A World Bank [analysis](#) found it can be cheaper for companies based in South Asia to trade with Brazil than with neighboring countries in the region. In addition to the shipping and paperwork challenges that all exporters face, women traders sometimes encounter sexual harassment and bribery demands.

[Ayanthi Gurusinghe](#), a woman entrepreneur in Sri Lanka, said it's time to change government policies throughout South Asia that make trade slow, cumbersome, and expensive. She founded a B2B company, [Cord360.com](#), that connects small buyers and sellers in dozens of countries for products ranging from dried fruits to pharmaceuticals.

Why women's entrepreneurship matters

Only 18% of businesses in South Asia are principally owned by women -- the world's lowest rate. Women entrepreneurs help support their families. Some start-up businesses, especially those involved in cross-border trade, create jobs and expand opportunities for other women.

The pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges of women-led businesses.

Many South Asian women face cultural, financial, and digital barriers to starting a business.

South Asian women are 26% less likely than men to have mobile phones. They are also less likely to have bank accounts, a first step in establishing credit.

Women-led businesses are an untapped source of strength in the region. Closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship and employment could add as much as 25% to South Asia's long-term economic growth, according to a 2017 [IME study](#).

Digital platforms such as Facebook offer a relatively easy first step for women to start a small business.

Surge in women entrepreneurs

Sairee Chahal, who founded her first company as a college student, said the pandemic has unleashed a surge in women entrepreneurs who need the kind of help she did when starting out. Chahal founded another company, **SHEROES**, in 2014 as an online community specifically for women and it now has 22 million members in India, Bangladesh, and more than 100 other countries. The website offers career tips, job leads, training, legal advice, and a free helpline, among other services.

In India alone, an estimated 20 million women will become micro-entrepreneurs over the next three years, Chahal said. Many will use digital platforms or e-commerce. “That would not be possible if 300 million [Indian] women hadn’t adopted the internet in the past three or four years,” she said. However, government policymakers have not yet recognized the enormous economic potential of women who create innovative products and services that ripple through the economy.

Women entrepreneurship could “have a huge impact on GDP and isn’t getting enough attention,” Chahal said. “We need more women’s participation across political structures ... We need to bring more and more women into the story.”

All three entrepreneurs agreed that financing is the single biggest barrier for South Asian women who want to start a company. So did **Anshula Kant**, a veteran banker from India and now the World Bank Group’s chief financial officer and managing director.

While the internet can be a great equalizer, it isn’t free. To grow and succeed, many women-led businesses need financing for digital payment systems and web-based logistics. “In addition to skills training, advice, and networks, there is an overwhelming need among women entrepreneurs for direct financial support,” Kant said.

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What do women entrepreneurs need?

Speakers at the #OneSouthAsia Conversation suggested several steps to help women entrepreneurs, including:

Emergency grants and loans. Government funding is critical to help women entrepreneurs survive the chaos created by the pandemic.

Government set-asides. Policies and programs could earmark a specific percentage of funding for women-led businesses. Policymakers would monitor if commitments are met and measure the impacts.

Women entrepreneurs group. A regional women's group could lobby for trade policy changes and offer networking, training, and mentoring.

More women’s participation in government. Women need to participate to influence policy and expand the women's agenda beyond home and child-rearing.

School textbooks showing women in a variety of roles. Textbooks can change perceptions and help close the region’s gender gap in jobs, pay, education, and opportunities.

Chahal added that South Asian women entrepreneurs should think big to reflect the region and its nearly 2 billion people. “There is an opportunity to create region-specific business models that are equally scalable, equally profitable, equally tech-driven, and very, very high in impact.”

Cross-border networking and mentors

Networking among digital start-ups could have a profound long-term impact on South Asia – a region still dogged by travel restrictions and national border disputes. Start-up companies in the digital economy often reach across national boundaries to share information, establish partnerships, and target customers.

“In terms of the demographics, a lot of the culture and habits are the same when you look at India, or Bangladesh, or Afghanistan,” Adamjee said. “The internet blurs those borders.”

Strengthening links means supporting women-led businesses with mentors, networks, and sources of expertise.

For example, Dot & Line is thriving, in part, because Adamjee reached out to Indian entrepreneurs with successful education firms when creating her new business model. She was delighted by their response. “We had CEOs and CTOs of companies not just sharing knowledge and experiences -- so we wouldn’t make the same mistakes -- right down to sharing contracts and [website] wireframes, connecting us with their team members, and showing us how they did things,” she said. “It was phenomenal.”

Women-led businesses are an important source of jobs and economic strength for South Asia. The panelists agreed that women entrepreneurs need access to finance, mentors, and role models to help their businesses succeed and offered specific recommendations. (See “What do women entrepreneurs need?” on page 3).



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