

Cornelia Sperling
RevierA GmbH, Germany
Association of German Women Entrepreneurs - VdU

The value of Networking for Women's Business Associations

22 years of experience empowering Women Entrepreneurs

My background are 22 years of experience as an entrepreneur in Germany and as an activist in Women's Business Associations since the beginning: I founded one of the first networks in Germany in 1992 and since 12 years I'm on the board of the VdU – the Association of German Women Entrepreneurs in the Ruhr Region.

www.vdu.de/verband/about_the_vdu

In addition – and that's a special thing – my company RevierA, an agency for communication with 10 employees, develops projects to empower women entrepreneurs since 18 years. That means: we raise money, partners and resources for good ideas - which could never be realized with the voluntary work of Women's Business Associations only. www.reviera.de

Annual meeting of Women Business Owners and International Exchange

One example of our work: since 1996 we realize a big convention of Women Business Owners in our region, a cooperation of 15 businesswomen networks and 13 economic institutions. Every year 600 to 700 women entrepreneurs and those starting a business exchange experiences. And they discuss business strategies – a topic which often disappears in workaday life. Our main achievement: we put GROWTH as a central theme on the agenda. The next convention will take place April 20, 2013. www.chefin-online.de

Another example: we realize exchange with businesswomen from other countries. This encourages entrepreneurs who are mainly active in local and regional markets. We try to open the minds to global developments.

We had guests from European countries since 1998, from Marocco 2005, India 2006, Egypt 2008. 2010 we were glad to welcome African and Asian guests – even if unfortunately half of the group didn't make it to Germany because of the eruption of the volcano in Iceland. We realized an International Strategic Workshop in cooperation with the CHANCE-Project– CHamber and Advisory Network and Cooperation for women Entrepreneurs and InWEnt, financed by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Our main topics were:

- 1) How can Women's Business Associations use their influence to initiate more changes for women in society?
- 2) How can growth of women's businesses be supported by the associations?

In 2011 some of you were in Germany and we organized a workshop about building up sustainable connections between Women's Business Associations.

<https://gc21.giz.de/chance>

The nineties: A new generation of women entrepreneurs

Let's have a look at the development over the last decades. A tremendous development of women entrepreneurship has been going on in the last 20 years.

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor publishes special reports on Women and Entrepreneurship since 2006 – they see an increase of 50 to 80 percent more women entrepreneurs since the nineties, in some countries even more. www.gemconsortium.org

A new generation of businesswomen came into being in the nineties. In the years before - since the end of World War II - women entrepreneurs were exotic flowers, either beneficiaries of husbands who died, or outstanding personalities who had the resources not to care about the cultural standards of society concerning women. In the sixties the president of the German Industrial and Trade Association, Mr. Berg, put these norms into words: "We should love women, but not make business with them".

But women made business in the nineties – the majority with little resources, facing lots of barriers, realizing their dreams and struggling for acceptance.

And lots of Associations were founded to strengthen this new group, to make women entrepreneurs visible, to encourage young women to start a business and to develop all sorts of exchange and support.

Some examples: ALEAP, Association of the Lady Entrepreneurs of Andra Pradesh, India, founded in 1993. Tadbirkor Ayol, Business Women's Association in Uzbekistan, started in 1991 and has 12.000 members now. We made a research about all the businesswomen-networks which were founded in the nineties in Germany and ended up with 472. The Businesswomen's Association of South Africa was formed in the year 2000 when three organisations merged. There are lots of other examples.

2000 – 2010: Global developments

The new millennium brought a new acknowledgement of the role of women entrepreneurs for both developing and developed economies.

In 2006 the World Bank Group decided to spend 36 million \$ to develop the Gender Action Plan - a four year initiative to promote women's economic empowerment and gender equality. www.web.worldbank.org

Mr. Zoellick, President of the World Bank Group, said: "Gender and women's empowerment is at the core of what we need to do in the field of development. Gender equality is also smart economics." Maybe you know the "Doing Business Gender Project" and the research on reforms that improve business opportunities for women. www.doingbusiness.org

ILO, the International Labour Organization, set up special programmes like WED (Women's Entrepreneurship Development) as a part of SEED (Small enterprise development programme. www.ilo.org/wed

The United Nations put the Millennium Goal "Promote Gender Equality and empower women" as Nr. 3 of the 8 Millennium Goals. The United Nations Development Programme – UNDP – focused on the theme of women's economic empowerment. www.undp.org

The World Economic Forum issued a special report on Women and Entrepreneurship, the Asian Development Bank supported women's enterprise development, the OECD organized several conventions about businesswomen, etc, etc,

When you research all this in the internet, you get the impression: women can solve most of the problems of this world, they are the ones with the biggest potential to reduce poverty, they are modest enough to not want more than microcredits, they jump in to solve conflicts...

But you also get the impression: Nobody ignores the potential of women entrepreneurs any longer!

International Exchange as Inspiration

In the period of 2000-2010 a global women's entrepreneur movement developed. You are all part of it!

The basis for the international activity is the work of the Women's Business Associations on the national level. Here we can see an impressive development of more and more differentiated activities.

Then there is a growing number of examples for regional cooperation in favour of women entrepreneurs: In the CHANCE-project you cooperated with "SWEC – SAARC Chamber Women Entrepreneurs Council" in Asia and the SADC Gender Unit in Africa.

Examples for international conventions are the Global Women Summit the World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report), the OECD-Forums on Women Entrepreneurship, and lots of initiatives like the "Int. Businesswomen Forum" some of you attended in Berlin 2010.

I want to focus on the international women's entrepreneur association FCEM.

FCEM – Femmes Chef d'Entreprises Mondiales

FCEM means: Femmes Chef d'Entreprises Mondiales = World Association of Women Entrepreneurs. www.fcem.org

This International Association was founded in 1945 in France by Yvonne Foinant. Today there are more than 70 members in the five continents. Each year a World Congress is organized. Just one month ago the 60. Congress took place in Berlin – 300 businesswomen from 38 countries plus 300 German entrepreneurs attended it and networked. The German Chancellor spoke in the assembly and appreciated the work of women entrepreneurs.

In my opinion FCEM is both strong and weak: Strong because of its international ties and its Worldcongress each year – 2013 in Mexico. Weak because the work in the organisation is totally voluntary, the presidents have to finance every journey by themselves. FCEM surely is financed by its members, but quite a few WBAs hesitate to join because they don't want to spend money for an international organisation.

It was a principle of FCEM that only one association per country could be admitted; but that's a problem for bigger countries - this year the board decided that federations can join as well.

Another new decision was the cooperation with the project WE Connect. WE Connect tries to connect women owned businesses with big corporations. Only 1% of all suppliers to multinational corporations and governments are women entrepreneurs. This should be changed. www.weconnectinternational.org

Another new step is the commitment of each national organisation to strengthen the ties to the other members of FCEM. What does that mean in practice? I'll try to exemplify how it's organised in our German Association.

VIT – VdU International Team

Ten years ago VdU looked for a way to promote and strengthen the FCEM network. All members were asked if they had contacts to foreign countries – either business-like, cultural, political or personal. A pool was established (120 members).

Out of this pool 45 members were appointed country-delegates. That means, they have good connections to one country, and members of VdU can call them if they need help to establish business contacts with this country.

Part of the structure of the VdU International Team VIT is a Board of 5 women, one of them chairperson. Each of them is responsible for a defined region of the world and coordinates the activities between VdU members and entrepreneurs as well as Associations of this region. www.vdu.de/international/vdu_international_team

Models of International Networking

Since VIT exists, there is a visible increase of international activities in our businesswomen association! A new development in 2010: a delegation of 68 VdU members visited China, and a cooperation with the Women's Entrepreneur Association of China was signed in Shanghai. 2012 another delegation went to India, strengthening the ties with ALEAP through a cooperation agreement.

The example of VdU just shows one model for international networking. What is interesting: these journeys have a double track: Business contacts and bilateral contacts between associations.

Today I learned more about the CHANCE network and its international ties. If you go on strengthening these ties after the official end of the project, that would be a role model for others!

I can add other models: Women entrepreneurs from Egypt visited our Convention 2008. The association from Alexandria then decided to establish a Businesswomen Day in their region. We could give them inspiration and concrete help - I am proud that we are the mentors for the Alexandrian Businesswomen Day, now in the 4th year. I met Azza Mahfouz last month at the FCEM Worldcongress and we discussed the concept of their next conference. <http://businesswomeninegypt.org/>

Another model was a study trip in Febr. 2012 for 10 women entrepreneurs from the Business Associations of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tadjikistan, made possible by the Gender Unit of GIZ. We organized encounters with different networks and associations, with projects like mentoring and with several Women Entrepreneurs. This week was very effective - at the end we transferred all the inputs into ideas for the future work in Central Asia. Actually we are trying to realize a project to support the implementation of a mentoring programme in Uzbekistan with the support of mentoring-activists of VdU. http://bwa.uzorg.net/index_eng.html

2010-2020 Challenges for Women's Business Associations

What are the characteristics of the new decade 2010-2020?

I will put some spotlights on the actual situation.

There are more studies of international institutions, e.g. a research of both World Bank and GIZ about the question: Why are female owned firms not scaling up? This kind of research and the policy recommendations (in this case for Latin America and the Caribbean) are very valuable for Women's Business Associations.

What irritated me during my research preparing this speech: When I went on the internet site of the World Bank Group called Doing Business trying to find information about the gender activities I had to develop abilities of a detective to find something about women entrepreneurs. No more smart gender economics after the programme ended in 2010?

My impression: the wind blows tougher.

There is a continuing gender gap in terms of entrepreneurship. But in times of crisis, when many businesses are struggling to survive and grow, policies to support women entrepreneurs can fall off the agenda. I don't know if after the end of the CHANCE-project (which was the financially biggest project supporting women entrepreneurs through our Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development), there will be other projects.

The commitment of the state and economic institutions to support women entrepreneurship is very important – but I believe, that Women's Business Associations worldwide are the key factor in the process of opening up the potential of women to be successful entrepreneurs and advancing women's economic opportunities.

Germany is an example for a rich and modern society with good rankings in analysis of Women's Economic Opportunities, but it's not true that there are no barriers for women to build up and grow their own businesses. The traditional structures concerning the role of men and women have strong impact on business life. Often clients don't accept female business partners, especially in the technical sector and when a lot of money is involved. My experience of 22 years in the field of empowering women entrepreneurs: The structures of society and especially the gender structures have the most important impact on the development of women entrepreneurship. In my opinion empowerment of women entrepreneurs can't take place without reflecting the gender structures in economy / the gender stereotypes in society and needs communication to develop strategies how to cope with it.

A proposal of the American colleagues is to develop strategical Roadmaps to 2020. The Roadmap is a multi-year strategic action plan that is designed to spur growth at all stages along the women's business development. http://nawbo.org/content_11733.cfm
I agree with their analysis about the challenge of the new phase 2010-2020: we have to focus on accelerating growth of women owned businesses in both developing and developed economies and to strengthen the infrastructure needed to accelerate women's enterprise development.

Therefore Networking has to go a step further – forward to formal cooperation with state and economic institutions. That's the actual challenge I see Women's Business Associations are facing until 2020: to create models influencing infrastructure for more favorable conditions for women entrepreneurs. In the process of this work it's very inspiring to network on the international level.

Changing the tough gender structures of our societies - that's the long term value of networking for Women's Business Associations!