

Forming a Women's Business Association in Nepal

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In 1987, at the close of the United Nations Women's Decade, a start had been made at bringing women into the mainstream of world commerce. In Nepal, however, few women could point to entrepreneurial role models. Most worked in isolation with little support from Nepali culture for women in business.

That same year the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Nepal (WEAN) was established as an autonomous association formed by and for women entrepreneurs in Nepal. Its objective is to draw out women entrepreneurs and encourage them to work toward excellence in their businesses. WEAN's initial effort created a network for women business owners from all regions of Nepal to meet, share experience, develop their businesses, exchange expertise and distribute information.

One of the goals the founders of WEAN had was to build a solid institutional base for the organization that included clear legal validity.

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Although the organization was founded in 1987, it experienced numerous starts and stops in becoming a legal entity. Political instability in Nepal meant that each time WEAN submitted registration papers to the proper authorities there was a change in government, a military takeover or some other political disturbance that prevented the



organization's legal framework from being completed. WEAN leaders persevered and after 12 years finally completed that process.

The founders of WEAN chose to organize themselves as an independent association instead of joining the existing mainstream business association, the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI). Cofounder Rita Thapa explains: "We did not think of joining FNCCI in our

wildest dreams because WEAN grew out of women's experience of not finding space in 'mainstream' organizations. Even if we had wanted to join FNCCI, I doubt they could hold our vision and objectives as their own. So we had to create our own organization and begin from there to establish our identity, and lobby and advocate for our needs."

Twelve years later, WEAN is clearly perceived as an organization to work with by FNCCI. As a direct result of their building a separate organization, WEAN has been able to secure a seat at the table in a mainstream business group. WEAN's president, Shanti Chadha, is an executive member of the FNCCI board. As an outspoken advocate, Chadha also chairs the Women Entrepreneurs Development Committee. Her presence on the FNCCI board and her active involvement in committees give women entrepreneurs high-profile representation at the national level.

WEAN's efforts have done much to secure a higher profile for women entrepreneurs in Nepal. Ms. Thapa describes their success: "Broadly, I feel we have demonstrated that there is such a species as the women entrepreneur. We have mobilized and strengthened

such women at all business levels, and in this process we, ourselves, learned of existing gaps and constraints. We have also learned about organizational behavior. We have set an example for many others to follow in terms of getting women to work together and build solidarity." WEAN's efforts have allowed Nepali women entrepreneurs to gain self-confidence, learn new entrepreneurial skills and increase community interaction.

Starting with three founders and a few full-time members, the organization has grown to more than

WEAN provides a complete package of training in order to upgrade the basic skills of startup women-owned enterprises to make sure that their businesses suit the internal market. Upcoming training programs will include the following components:

- Leadership
- Group Management Training
- Basic Bookkeeping & Accounting
- Noodle Making
- Potato Growing
- Floriculture Training
- Entrepreneurship Development
- Cooperative Marketing

products nationally and promoting international trade. Plans for organizational development and capacity building include upgrading the leadership skills of the board, re-defining board roles, charging WEAN staff with the authority to execute training programs, and reforming board policy formation.

Moving toward financial sustainability is an enormous task for the WEAN board of directors and staff. Currently, the organization primarily is supported by international donor agencies. WEAN's leadership is aware of the dangers this poses to the future of their organization. Already numerous services have been established to cover operating expenses, including trade exhibitions, discussion programs, community entertainment, and retail sales through the WEAN Cooperative. In the long run, WEAN intends to reduce its dependency on external funds from donors by building a capital base to ensure that operational expenses can be covered consistently. To this end, WEAN will review its pricing structure for services, training and membership dues; expand its credit and savings program to new regions and increase its loan portfolio; and boost membership to 130 by the year 2000.

WEAN is striving to make its own structure an example of best practices in planning, monitoring and reporting. If this can be accomplished, the association can continue being a bright light for the Nepali women entrepreneurs that form its membership. 🌟

WEAN's Advocacy Tools

- ✓ Monthly programs on topical issues
- ✓ Quarterly newsletters
- ✓ Special discussion programs
- ✓ Enterprise seminars
- ✓ Exchange workshops with other organizations

fifty members led by an executive board of seven. Today, WEAN offers a substantial number of training packages, a committed executive board, a full-time paid staff, networking activities, advocacy initiatives, a fully staffed retail cooperative, savings programs, and a formal credit program with the assistance of the Women's World Bank. Credit is currently made available for vegetable farming, poultry and livestock, tourism, and manufacturing industries.

WEAN has implemented a four-pronged strategy to guide its future activities. Those key areas are membership, marketing, organizational development, and financial sustainability. Specifically related to membership are program activities, training and enterprise counseling as well as consulting, networking and access to credit and savings. WEAN's marketing strategy makes use of its sister organization, the WEAN Cooperative, which provides assistance for marketing