



Empowering women  
for a better future



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.

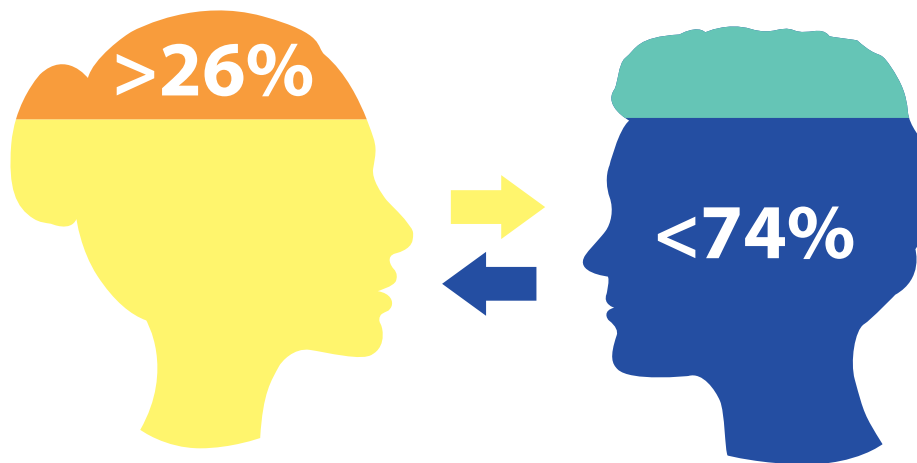




# Introduction

Over the past twenty years, economic growth in Azerbaijan has brought new employment opportunities for its people. Unemployment rates dropped from 12 percent in 2000 to five percent in 2018.

However, the boon has not benefitted everyone equally. Employment rates among women, although relatively high (67 percent), are lower than among men (72 percent). In general, women find it harder than men to get jobs in well-paid sectors, such as energy or industry. They tend to be employed mainly in underpaid sectors traditionally regarded as feminine, such as education, health care and services. Only 26 percent of the country's entrepreneurs are women.



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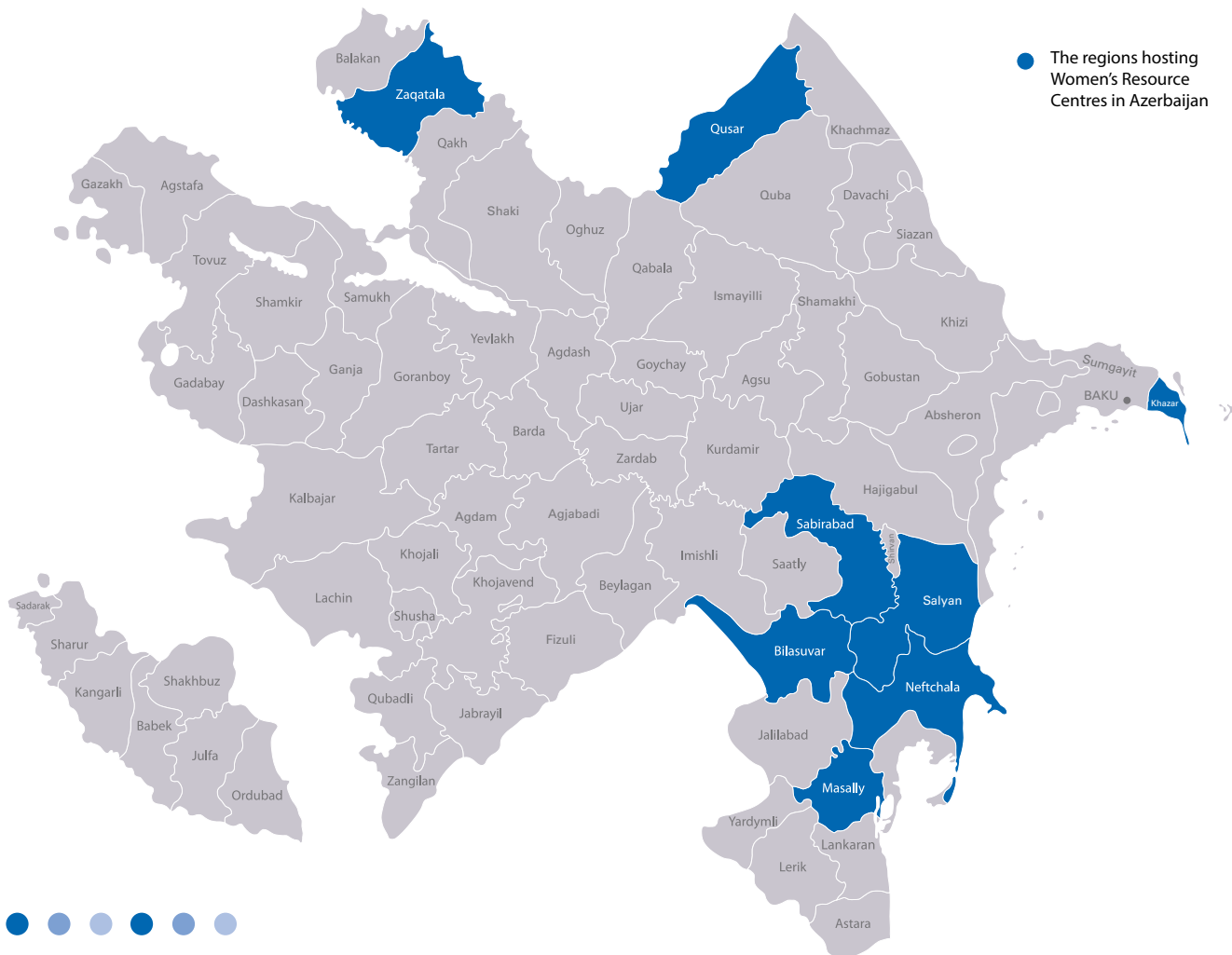


In Azerbaijan, as in many parts of the world, the disparities in economic opportunities for women and men are rooted in patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. These deeply ingrained social norms impede the realisation of legal provisions on gender equality. Traditional gender roles in the household leave women bearing the burden of unpaid domestic and care work – a fundamental obstacle to their entering and rising in the labour market or setting up their own enterprises. Women also find it harder to come by opportunities for professional development, including skills training and networking, which are key

to their economic empowerment and independence. Confidence, capital and connections, easily available to men, elude most women.

In such a context, giving women spaces to meet, network, exchange ideas, forge partnerships, attract capital, gain confidence and grow professionally can have transformative impacts. In rural and remote areas especially, such spaces can be instrumental in helping women to learn more about their rights, discover untapped potential, and overcome obstacles that once seemed insurmountable.





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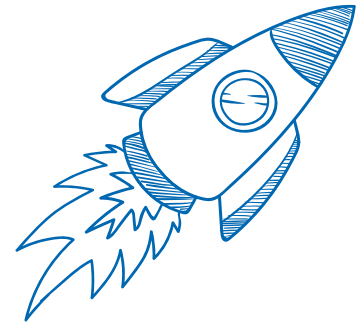
*Confidence, capital and connections, easily available to men, elude most women.*

The Women's Resource Centres in Azerbaijan have done precisely this, equipping women in rural areas with tools and resources to help them launch their own businesses. Since their launch in 2011, the eight Women Resource Centers in Bilasuvar, Neftchala, Salyan, Sabirabad, Masally, Zaqatala, Qusar and Khazar, have provided

more than 6,000 women with free training courses on a range of hard and soft skills – from accounting and financial literacy, computer science, fundraising and women's human and economic rights to resumé writing, presentation skills and networking.



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There is growing evidence that networking and mentoring efforts have even greater impact on women’s entrepreneurial abilities than access to finance and credit. In most parts of the world, women struggle to build self-esteem, breaking free of sexist stereotypes, gender-based discrimination, and violence.

The Women’s Resource Centres in Azerbaijan have created an ecosystem for women to learn from and support one another in their quest for personal fulfilment and economic empowerment. They have helped women gain confidence and equality in the family, and grow in stature to become role models in the community. As much as in material success, it is in these intangible gains that the resource centres have left a lasting impact. Their experiences offer important lessons to governments, multilateral and donor organizations, the private sector, civil society and other actors working to advance gender equality as part of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Women’s Resource Centres have been set up by UNDP in Azerbaijan with generous financial support from a range of donors, including the European Union, the United States Agency for International Development, the Coca-Cola Foundation and, most recently, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Austrian Development Agency. Longstanding partnership with the Government of Azerbaijan and specifically support from the State Committee for Family, Women and Children’s Affairs, both at the national and local levels, have been key to the success of these centres.





As a next step, in 2019, thanks to new partnerships and additional generous funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Austrian Development Agency, it is expected that 70 new women-led start-ups will be created and that over 400 women will benefit from training and networking opportunities. This new initiative will help the Women's Resource Centres establish long-term cooperation with 12 large private companies in the country to make quality jobs more accessible to the Women's Resource Centre trainees. By adopting the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP), these companies will be joining over 2,000 business around the world who have endorsed the UN Global Compact WEP to promote gender equality in business and ensure gender responsive corporate policies and practices.



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*This booklet presents **the experiences of six women** whose exposure to the Women's Resource Centres changed their lives. Their stories demonstrate that with the right idea, personal determination and the right support, women can overcome myriad challenges and become successful entrepreneurs. They also show that it is critical to sustain and expand Women's Resource Centres to reach more women in Azerbaijan and take this model for women's entrepreneurship to other countries.*



Rena Mekhraliyeva (centre) received EU support for her business organising pre-wedding 'Henna Night' ceremonies in the town of Sabirabad in southern Azerbaijan. "I never imagined myself as an entrepreneur; I was afraid that nothing would come out of it. But then I got so much positive energy and confidence and it all worked out!" © **European Union**

## Rena



*"I knew exactly what kind of service we would provide, and I was sure it would be attractive for people here"*



Rena is an active trade unionist in Sabirabad. She had two reasons for joining the Women's Resource Centre that opened in the town in 2013: to gain entrepreneurial skills and contribute to the Centre's work and aims.

"I joined in 2013 because I believe in this centre," she says. "I think it is just what we needed here. I also know it's up to us to make it work. I attended all the women's groups discussions and then I took the business courses. My daughter joined as well, and she's been with me all along – taking most of the courses and urging me to launch my own start-up."

With her daughter's encouragement, Rena pitched what seemed a risky business idea: a service providing pre-wedding ceremonies.

"I knew exactly what kind of service we would provide, and I was sure it would be attractive for people here," she says. "But I wasn't at all sure if they could afford the costs on top of all their other wedding expenses. I hadn't worked in business before, so it seemed a huge risk. It was only when I took the financial management course that I realized that risks can also be calculated and managed."

The experts at the Centre had confidence in Rena and her idea, and once her business plan was complete, provided her with help in renting premises and with funds to buy traditional wedding clothing and equipment for organising the ceremonies.

Rena presents the ceremonies as "Henna Nights, Azerbaijani Style". Usually held a few days before the wedding, these ceremonies are attended by women from the bride and groom's families and last all night. The room where the guests gather is decorated with red and gold, symbolizing joy and fertility. The ceremony celebrates henna



A pre-wedding 'Henna Night' ceremony in the town of Sabirabad in southern Azerbaijan. Thanks to EU support, Rena Mekhraliyeva was able to set up the first business in the region offering the Henna Night ceremony. With increased demand, Rena's business is growing: eight people are now involved in it and there are even some orders from neighbouring regions. © **European Union**

and its legendary magical powers to protect the bearer from 'the evil eye'.

The ceremonies – the first such to be offered in Sabirabad – proved extremely popular and the business quickly took off. The rapid growth of Rena's business has benefited other women in Sabirabad, too. She now employs eight additional staff, all of them women. She has also helped women from three other cities to replicate her idea.

In 2016, Rena won more support to expand her business and purchase additional equipment, including microphones and a professional film camera. She has big plans for Henna Nights, which include more space and a menu of services, such as make-up styling for the bride and guests.



Gulnara Ahmadova adjusting a fitness routine for one of her trainees at the fitness centre she established at the heart of Bilasuvar. She is determined to helping rural women in her community get in shape, improve fitness and strength and live a healthy and happy life.

© UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

## Gulnara



*“I started to think like an entrepreneur, seeing opportunities where before I’d just seen a problem”*

Gulnara was 22 when she opened a beauty salon offering hairdressing, make-up styling, and other cosmetic treatments in the small town of Bilasuvar. "It was a struggle to get by at first, with only a few customers a day, but word got around and slowly the salon became more and more popular," she remembers.

That early confident step towards economic independence made Gulnara think about becoming a businesswoman. "I was staying at home but I began wondering if there were other opportunities out there for me. The more I listened to my clients at the salon, the more I realised that women in this area wanted facilities that didn't exist. I started to think like an entrepreneur, seeing opportunities where before I'd just seen a problem."

One complaint Gulnara often heard from her clients was that there were no gym facilities or spas for women in the town. Instead of merely nodding in agreement, Gulnara started thinking about how she could set up these facilities herself.

But Gulnara had no idea how to set up a formal company and access the capital to invest in a start-up. And so, for a while, her idea didn't materialize.

Things changed when she heard of the business training courses offered by the Women's Resource Centre in Bilasuvar. "The people at the Centre said they could help any woman who could come up with a feasible idea for a business – not just to help us make a proper business plan, but also with the initial investment. I really didn't have to think twice about enrolling for the course."

*"The more I listened to my clients at the salon, the more I realised that women in this area wanted facilities that didn't exist."*



Gulnara learned valuable entrepreneurial and business administration skills during the 6 days course at the Women's Resource Centre. She also gained immensely in confidence. "I made a lot of friends and contacts at the Centre with women from other villages and towns," she says. "I think it changed all of us in how we see ourselves as women in this society."

The expert trainers at the Centre immediately recognized the feasibility of Gulnara's idea of setting up a gym. They worked with her to turn her idea into a business plan, and also helped her to buy her first fitness equipment and renovate the premises.

The small town's first gym for women opened in 2017. It soon signed on more than 20 clients as regular members.

Gulnara's next big move is to set up a spa centre as an extension to the gym. She has put her new entrepreneurial skills into practice to make sure it happens: making careful estimates of the costs and drawing up a sound business plan.



Zumrud Mammadova working from home at her computer desk in Neftchala taking a deep dive into exploring the field of computer science as she recognises the power of technology and innovative in building a healthy society where everyone's right to education and access to resources is respected. © UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

## Zumrud



*Zumrud's computer centre got critical support in its launch phase: free premises at the Women's Resource Centre in Neftchala.*

As a young girl, Zumrud's dream was to go to university. She was a precocious child with a curious mind who always wanted to learn. But growing up in a traditionally patriarchal environment, she did not get the support of her family. Her parents sent her brothers to college, but kept her at home.

Zumrud married young. When she was 19, she took a computer science course in Neftchala, with permission from her husband. It proved to be a turning point in her life. She did so well that soon after she graduated, she was instantly offered a job at the local computer training centre.

For the next 13 years, Zumrud mostly worked with various administrative offices, performing tasks such as typing documents, creating PowerPoint presentations and designing infographics and charts.

"In 2015, when the first Women's Resource Centre opened in Neftchala to support women who wanted to develop their own businesses, I was one of the first to apply. I took a series of courses on how to start and improve a business and then submitted my own business plan for funding", Zumrud said.

She was one of six women in Neftchala with winning proposals. The grant award allowed Zumrud to purchase the equipment she needed to open her own computer services centre. Her regular clients followed her to her new business address, as she was able to expand on the range of IT and software services she offered. She also designed courses on basic computer literacy and MS Office user skills, specifically targeted at teachers.

Zumrud's computer centre got critical support in

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its launch phase: free premises at the Women's Resource Centre in Neftchala.

When a 14-year old girl with disabilities joined her course, Zumrud waived her tuition fee, as part of the corporate social responsibility mission of her new business. She also often helped high school teachers and graduates make use of the latest computer technology developments, setting up Prometheus Smart Boards in classrooms and offering guidance on online registrations for various classes and exams.

Soon, Zumrud earned a reputation as an expert in computer technology. In 2018, she accepted a position as computer maintenance supervisor at a factory in Hasanabad, a village about 15 kilometres away. But she continues investing in her computer centre in Neftchala and has become a role model for many young girls and women in her community aspiring to a similar career.



Rashada Asadova at her tailoring shop, which in Masalli received substantial funding support from USAID and UNDP.  
© UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

# Rashada



*Rashada's business is now running smoothly, she is earning three times more than she did before and she also started getting orders from the neighboring towns.*

Rashada is a seamstress in the city of Masalli in the south of Azerbaijan. She specialises in sewing quality linens and wedding trousseaus. Despite her talent, hard work, and determination she spent years unable to meet the demand for her highly marketable products and to make a living from her craft.

“My husband, my two children and I were all living in one small room,” said Rashada. “There wasn’t enough space for my sewing-machine, let alone for fabrics.”

Without a proper workspace, she was unable to get her business off the ground.

Rashada learnt of the Women’s Resource Centre that opened in Masalli from an old friend. “I went along the next day,” she says. “There were twenty of us listening carefully to the presentation. But when it was over and they asked us to come up with ideas, we were all silent. Finally, I thought to myself that I really don’t have anything to lose, so I put my hand up and told them my idea.”

Rashada’s idea was to expand her sewing business by converting an abandoned old shed in the yard of her apartment building into a work space.

“It seemed so simple and I never really thought it would be a business plan. But they took me seriously and I started the training.”

With the new connections and friends she made at the centre, Rashada learnt how to develop a business plan, analyse market needs, organize production, and build relations with customers and employees.

Within less than one year, she expanded her business. With the money she earned, she was able to build four walls for the shed so that

*“It seemed so simple and I never really thought it would be a business plan. But they took me seriously and I started the training.”*



© UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev



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she could keep her business running through the cold months. Impressed by her effort, the regional government in Masalli contributed funds to help her finish the construction.

Rashada's business is now running smoothly, she is earning three times more than she did before and she also started getting orders from the neighboring towns.

She stands as an example of how skilled women, with the right support, can become successful entrepreneurs. It has also inspired other women to come up with ideas and open similar businesses of their own.

In Masalli, as elsewhere, women, particularly those raising a family, rarely venture into

business. That's why UNDP set up one of its Women's Resource Centres here.

Many women are now part of the centre's network, participating in training workshops, run in collaboration with the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs, which has allowed the centre to use its premises in the municipal building. Above all, the women cherish this space, which allows them to meet outside their homes, share ideas and make business plans.

By the end of 2017, the Women's Resource Centre in Masalli had 253 members, up from 12 in 2015, and the number of businesses it supported was 51.





Khalida Jafarova is running a family-owned greenhouse in the backyard of her house in the Gizilagaj village of Salyan. In 2017 Khalida's business startup project received financial support from Coca-Cola Foundation's global funding platform – the New World Project (NWP), which aims to support women's entrepreneurship in Salyan and Neftchala. © UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

## Khalida



*Khalida's enthusiasm spurred her husband to set up a small family business to cultivate vegetables.*



© UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

Until her early 30s, Khalida was a housewife, looking after her two young children and in-laws. In the Gizilagaj village where she lives, situated 15 km from the center of Masalli, employment opportunities are scarce for women. So she took up farming in her backyard, even though she had not specialized training about cultivating fruits and vegetables.

Khalida started growing cucumbers and tomatoes for sale to earn some extra income for her family, while her husband took charge of cattle breeding and transporting crops. Over time, she realized that what she liked doing more than anything else was working with crops and cultivating organic produce. It also felt like the right thing to do as she had always been a keen advocate of healthy eating and home-made produce.



© UNDP Azerbaijan/Elmar Mustafayev

Khalida's enthusiasm spurred her husband to set up a small family business to cultivate vegetables. They built a greenhouse by themselves, but couldn't afford the expensive heating system.

In 2017, when UNDP opened a Women's Resource Centre in Salyan, Khalida signed up for a training course on starting and improving a business. She presented her greenhouse project and displayed remarkable hands-on agricultural knowledge of crops and fertilizers.

Khalida was one of nine women whose proposals won grants in 2017 from the Women's Resource Centre. She used the grant to procure pipes and metal accessories for the greenhouse heating infrastructure she had long desired. That same year, she had her first crop of off-season tomatoes. Khalida was ecstatic.

"By pursuing sustainable production, my greenhouse has less crops compared to competitors nearby. But my produce always sells fast because it's natural and grown without harmful pesticides, and the community loves it that way", says Khalida.

Today, Khalida's greenhouse is prospering and her tomatoes and cucumbers are growing in popularity as a trusted niche brand of local produce.

Her story is testament to how women in rural areas, with timely and targeted support, can realise their dreams, grow personally and professionally, and achieve success as entrepreneurs.



*"By pursuing sustainable production, my greenhouse has less crops compared to competitors nearby. But my produce always sells fast because it's natural and grown without harmful pesticides, and the community loves it that way".*



Sahraba, a local tailor and fashion designer, demonstrating her new women's apparel at the opening of the brand new "Woman's World" centre in her home town Masalli. Through funding support from USAID and UNDP, Sahraba was able to establish the first one-stop-shop solution for women in Masalli offering an amalgamation of clothing design and sewing services, a beauty salon, gym and wellness facilities and the cosmetics store, which also specialises in professional makeup classes for those interested. Collectively, the centre is home to 4 women-led enterprises, while Sahraba herself employs 6 other women and has 14 students. Along the way, Sahraba was able to triple her incomes and build a path to a brighter future.

## Sahraba



*Today, Sahraba is known as the brains behind Woman's World and its success.*

Sahraba was born and raised in Masalli. A talented seamstress and fabric designer, she dreamed of opening a small textile and sewing store of her own. She not only wanted to employ other women, but pass on her craft to a new generation of young tailors.

But Sahraba could only work at home, in a dark room with no windows. She had nothing but a very old sewing machine and an iron, so she couldn't take in any students or large orders, and struggled to meet existing demand. So, when Sahraba found out about a new entrepreneurship and employment programme at the Women's Resource Centre, she knew she had to apply.

Sahraba attended all the training courses, from women's rights to computer and accounting skills. She was an avid learner, persevering and diligent. Most importantly, she joined a training session on how to start a business. At the end of the training, Sahraba's idea about the store was endorsed and she used the grant to purchase new sewing machines and a professional iron.

Sahraba soon started to think bigger, looking for opportunities to build a hub that would bring several businesses together and offer women a broad spectrum of services, from fashion design to cosmetics and wellness. She located premises for the new venture and negotiated with the building owner. She also took responsibility for labour-intensive renovation and installation. With support from USAID and UNDP, "Woman's World" was born, housing four different businesses offering services to women in Masalli.

Sahraba further expanded her own tailoring business as she received seven more sewing machines and irons. Based in the "Woman's

*"I am very confident now and I trust my abilities. As I move forward, I see that more and more people recognise my expertise and treat me with respect. As I got stronger myself, I also realised that my family relationships improved. This was the best gift that life has given me after 30 years of marriage."*



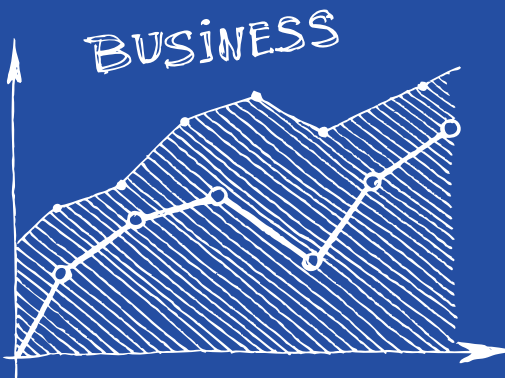
World" centre, her growing team, which now consists of six more employees and 14 students, work hand in hand with the three other businesses – a beauty salon, a fitness facility, and a cosmetics shop.

Today, Sahraba is known as the brains behind Woman's World and its success. Her role in the community has been transformed. Where once hardly anyone knew about her skills and ideas, today she is a prominent business developer, widely recognised and respected.

Looking ahead, Sahraba is hopeful of what's yet to come. "I am very confident now and I trust my abilities. As I move forward, I see that more and more people recognise my expertise and treat me with respect. As I got stronger myself, I also realised that my family relationships improved. This was the best gift that life has given me after 30 years of marriage."

Over **150**

women launched  
their own businesses



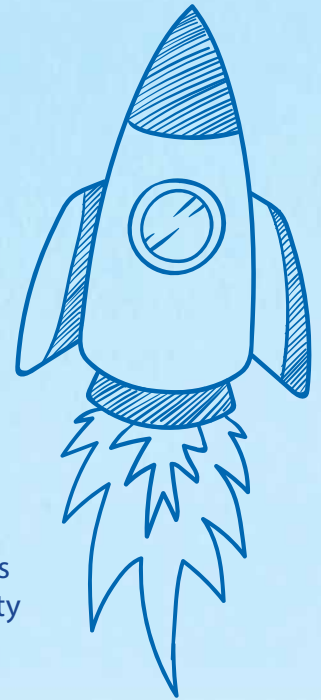
**2000**



women received comprehensive  
training on business  
development, organisational  
skills, project management and  
soft skills

Over **6000**

women were able to expand  
their business and social networks  
and overall benefitted from capacity  
building and community-based  
awareness raising campaigns







*Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.*

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