



ENVIRONMENT
SPECIAL



From
the People of Japan

GENDERED VOICES

*Impacts of COVID-19
on green jobs in the
informal sector*

United Nations Development Programme

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GENDERED VOICES

Impacts of COVID-19 on green jobs in the informal sector

ISSUE 04/ VOLUME 2 » 06/2021

INTRODUCTION

Ensuing a previous series of Gendered Voices Newsletter on Gender and Economic Resilience¹ pertaining to COVID-19 and its impacts on women in the formal sector, this new edition sheds light on the pandemic-triggered challenges and resilience strategies developed by women entrepreneurs in the informal sector, particularly those involved in green jobs*, in the Republic of Mauritius and Rodrigues Island.

Through an insight into the unique experiences of these women, this newsletter seeks to throw light on specific gendered challenges that they face amid COVID-19, and on the coping mechanisms they developed to build resilience. The evidence-based information may provide substantial entry points for policy formulation and targeted response strategies to empower and meet the immediate and long-term needs of women in the green and informal sector.



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IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON GREEN JOBS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR



Message from ... Mrs. Judes E. DeBaere, Chargée d'Affaires U.S. Embassy Mauritius and Seychelles



Date: 30 June 2021

Eleanor Roosevelt, who shaped the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, once said, “Without equality, there can be no democracy.” In other words, the status of women is the status of democracy. The United States is committed to policies that rest on a foundation of dignity and equity for women.

I would like to commend the UNDP for focusing this issue of the newsletter on the impacts of COVID-19 on green jobs in the informal sector. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has erased years of women’s economic gains. As is so often the case, the pandemic and the negative effects of climate

change are hitting the poorest and most marginalized women the hardest. These global trends damage all of us, because we know that governments, economies, and communities are stronger when they include the full participation of women — no country can recover from this pandemic if it leaves half of its population behind.

When women are economically empowered, they re-invest in their families and communities, producing a multiplier effect that spurs additional economic growth. The four stories in this newsletter show how women entrepreneurs from Mauritius and Rodrigues are helping their families and neighbours while also protecting the environment. It’s vital to tell their stories and recommit ourselves to the cause

of equity and equality for women.

Through exchange programs and partnerships with local NGOs, the U.S. Embassy is also supporting women entrepreneurs and gender equality. We recently launched the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE). This one-year program will enroll 25 women entrepreneurs from Mauritius and Rodrigues in the DreamBuilder program developed by Arizona State University. The program is implemented in partnership with the Association Mauricienne des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises (AMFCE) who will connect participants with an individual mentor. AWE provides the tools and network for women entrepreneurs who are re-entering the workforce or changing careers due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, more than ever, it is critically important to ensure women are afforded every opportunity to contribute to the rebuilding of the local and global economy.

Mrs. Judes E. DeBaere
Chargée d'Affaires U.S. Embassy
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IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON GREEN JOBS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Running parallel to the formal economy, the informal economy (also known as unregistered or grey economy) is neither taxed nor monitored by the Government, and is often characterized by low-skill, unsafe, small or undefined workplaces that tend to result in poor or irregular incomes.² The informal economy tends to be overlooked as a research area, even in the framework of COVID-19,³ and has for long been excluded from the concept of an inclusive green economy that aims to drive sustainable development and poverty eradication.⁴

In 2017⁵, the contribution of Mauritius' informal sector represented between 20-25% of the output of the formal sector. Like in most countries, the grey economy represents a viable social net mechanism for many people, especially women.⁶ Given the low female labour force participation registered at only 44.94% in 2019⁷, the informal sector remains a quintessential "survival mode" for many retrenched or unemployed Mauritian women who resort to self-employment for sustenance.^{8*}

Today, the green economy can no more ignore the magnitude of longstanding and sprawling informal jobs across the world and more specifically in developing countries.⁹ The clear nexus between informal jobs and the green economy is that workers tend to source their goods locally; use fewer packaging and generate less waste; use little or no electricity; and are more likely to recycle or reuse materials.¹⁰ In a nutshell, their carbon footprint is far lower than their formal counterparts. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 15-20 million people worldwide earn a living from recycling waste.

Like in the formal sector, the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 has also been wreaking havoc on

informal economies, including its green dimension, and disrupting the livelihoods of a vast number of informal workers.¹¹ Similar to the formal economy, deeply-rooted gendered disparities pervade at cross-cutting levels within informal socioeconomic systems¹² and are expected to be exacerbated by the pandemic. Issues such as women's risk of unemployment and inhibited access to decent wage, safe working conditions, paid sick leave and labour law protection, to name a few, exist in many countries across the world, including Mauritius.

According to the UNDP's Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in Mauritius issued in October 2020, informal employment fell by 89,200 (above 59%) compared to 40,200 (approx. 10%) for formal employment during the lockdown period.¹³ As of July 2020, overall female employment in Mauritius declined by 6.5% (-13,900) in comparison to pre-crisis data.¹⁴ The feminization of poverty affects 10% of the population in Mauritius, with a female unemployment rate of 23,900 women compared to 18,000 men¹⁵.

Mauritius continues to endure unprecedented economic shocks from the onset of COVID-19. Compared to the 2nd Quarter of 2019, its real GDP at basic prices for the 2nd Quarter of 2020 suffered a drop of 32.9%.¹⁶ A potential GDP growth of 7.5% was projected in 2021, contingent upon the deployment of vaccines. However, a second wave of COVID-19 hit Mauritius in mid-February 2021, compounded with a new lockdown with heavy socioeconomic implications. In 2020, the Government of Mauritius rolled out a set of response measures including a financial aid of Rs 5,100 to every self-employed person.

* *Green jobs are decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment.*¹⁷

* *Sex-disaggregated data is unavailable.*¹⁸

ECO-FRIENDLY PRACTICES OF OCTOPUS FISHING: DANIELLE'S ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

For over 20 years, 48-year-old Danielle has been earning a living from fishing and catching octopus in the pristine lagoon of Port Sud-Est on Rodrigues Island. Divorced and mother of three children – two of whom are married and live separately - she owns her own corrugated iron-sheet abode in Eau-Claire, and is proud to be an independent woman. In the face of daily struggles to provide for her 12-year-old son and for herself, she shares her coping efforts amid COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown in 2020.

“After getting married, my ex-husband and I moved to a village called Coromandel. To earn an extra income, he taught me some basic fishing and octopus catching skills. In fact, there are many female octopus fishers in Rodrigues and we are well respected! It was my first ever job and continues to be my main source of revenue.

The practice of octopus fishing requires sharp understanding of tides and weather conditions, which determine the catch outcomes and the risks of being at sea. The best conditions entail low tide and good weather. At times, notwithstanding low tide forecasts, bad weather can send the tide rising, which is unfavorable.

On an auspicious fishing day, I leave home at 4 am to reach the beach at 5 am by walking. Octopus fishing requires a pair of boots, a hat to protect oneself from the sun and a spear.



Together with other female octopus fishers, we await the low tide and then hop on a fishing boat or trudge our way by foot to the reefs, where octopus can be found. It is important to be alert about tide fluctuations to avoid wading back onshore through water rising up to the neck! People can drown”.

Danielle raises concern about the growing scarcity of octopus and several fish species in Rodrigues compared to 20 years ago. Even when all the natural elements are propitious, she sometimes catches none.

“On average, I catch 3 to 4 octopuses which I sell to buyers on the coast. At times, I bring one back home if I know that there is nothing to eat. But there are days when I struggle to put any food at all on the table. My son being at school, I have his tuition fees to pay. Besides fishing, I am compelled to uptake small jobs here and there.

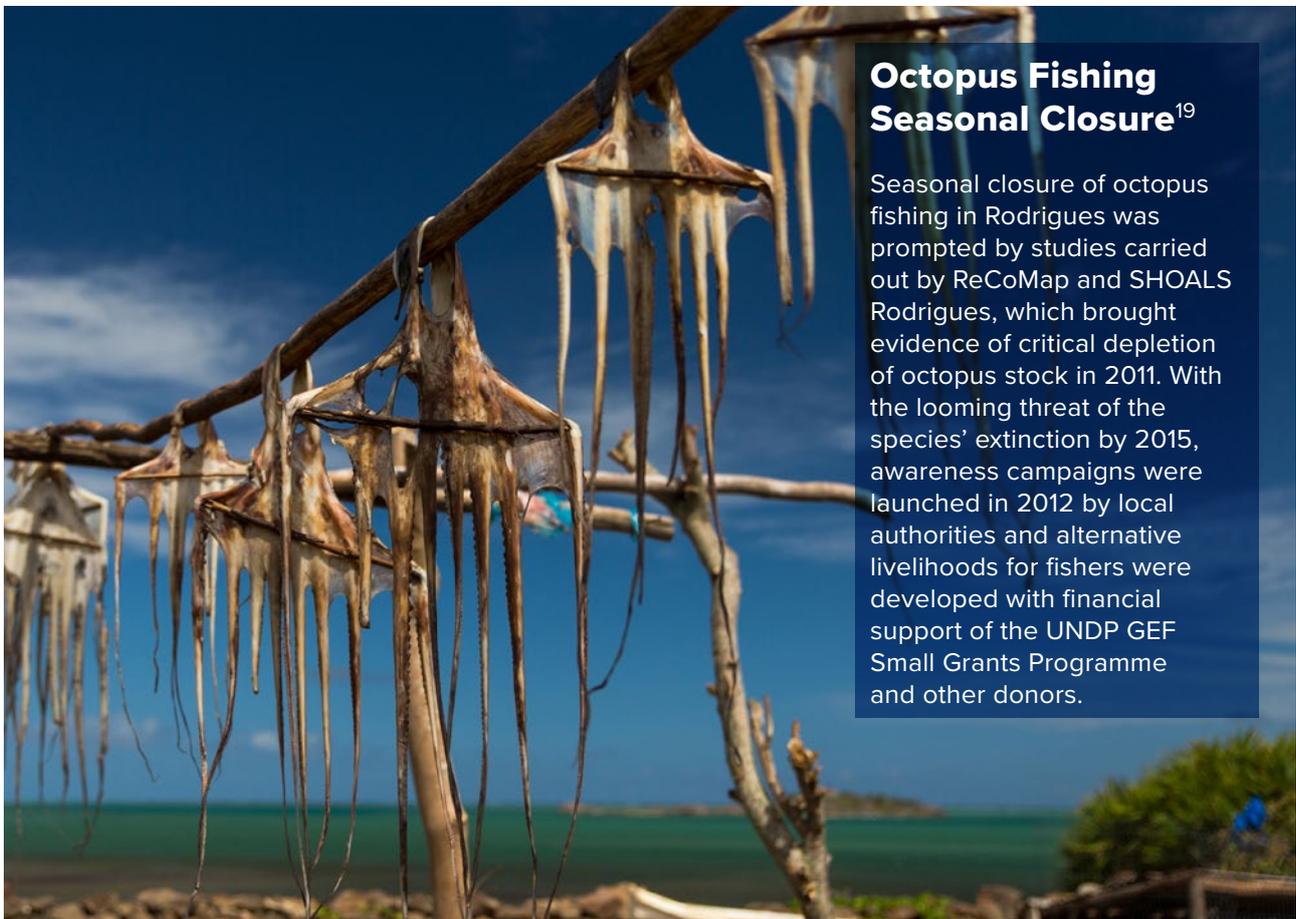
Since the government instigated octopus fishing seasonal closures to allow spawning periods

throughout February and from August to October, and offer a meagre Rs250 compensation per day to octopus fishers, I started working part-time at the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation based in Rodrigues, where I was trained in environmental ethics. I am more aware of the vulnerability of our marine ecosystem. I avoid stepping on and breaking corals whilst fishing octopus. I also do not fish small octopus or baby fishes. My female fisher friends and I always agree that the octopus closure period should be stretched to save our octopus, even at our own expense!”

Unaware of any governmental grants she could be eligible to amid the COVID-19 lockdown, Danielle relied upon her savings, whatever crop she had been cultivating in her garden and fish she had caught and stored, to subsist.

“ Fortunately, I earned some money just prior to lockdown in 2020. Days preceding the lockdown was the reopening season for octopus fishing. On the first day, I caught 15 pounds of octopus (seven in total), 8 pounds on the second day and 5 on the third day. Additionally, due to adverse weather conditions, I received a ‘Bad Weather Allowance’. However, my son and I still struggled during the one-month long lockdown. We ate mostly pulses, vegetables from the garden and little fish we had in stock

I am a poor fisher and a mother sacrificing herself with the hope of sending my child to university one day. However, job opportunities for young people are drastically low in Rodrigues. The government must drive sustainable development projects for green job creations for the future generation and women!”



Octopus Fishing Seasonal Closure¹⁹

Seasonal closure of octopus fishing in Rodrigues was prompted by studies carried out by ReCoMap and SHOALS Rodrigues, which brought evidence of critical depletion of octopus stock in 2011. With the looming threat of the species’ extinction by 2015, awareness campaigns were launched in 2012 by local authorities and alternative livelihoods for fishers were developed with financial support of the UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme and other donors.



PERMACULTURE AND FREE-RANGE CHICKEN FARMING: GIVRETTE'S ECO-ETHICAL BUSINESS

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Since 2005, 50-year-old Givrette operates a small-scale sustainable free-range chicken farm and an organic restaurant at Corail, Petit Butte, on Rodrigues Island. Starting with subsistence chicken rearing years ago, today Givrette has over 200 chicken and other animals such as sheep, ducks and pigs wandering freely on her vast land.

“Back in the day, I focused mostly on the plantation of green beans, manioc, maize, chili, aubergine, etc. for sale, and raised livestock for my own household.

The transition towards the expansion of my animal farm was profit-driven, and based on the fact that the drought-prone climate of Rodrigues is not always favorable to agriculture. Water continues to be a major problem here.

I have always adhered to ecofriendly and organic practices in all aspects of plantation and animal farming. My chickens are not

crammed together in choking enclosures, pecking one another and spreading diseases. I avoid using pesticides for crops and chemical-laden food for my animals. Between composting organic vegetations and using manure to cultivate fertile soil, I feed my animals maize harvested in my own backyard. This sort of no waste sustainable and harmonious cycle – permaculture - is not only the healthiest, but also the cheapest!.

Being a woman and a mother, at the beginning work was tedious for me. Like an octopus with multiple tentacles, I would handle various things at once: household chores; childcare; agricultural work; animal rearing. I also had to run the restaurant that entails non-stop cooking, serving and handling payments. Eventually, I employed two women to support me in managing the restaurant.”

From its onset, Givrette’s restaurant business and pastured poultry has been growing in popularity. Today, it proudly hosts high-profile customers such as the President of Mauritius, ministerial delegations and business persons, and is also open to tourists and local clients.

“Last year’s COVID-19 phase and stringent lockdown put my whole business on hold. Hence, I concentrated on my agricultural activities. I planted many vegetables which I sold to people residing in the vicinity and in local markets. Pertaining to my chicken, I did kill a few for storage, and I cooked a couple of them which I shared with the neighborhood. It was out of the question to waste anything!

Due to the dry seasons that starve the population, animals and plants of water, rainwater harvesting is a common practice in Rodrigues. However, this technique is not really appropriate for my household and business. Every month, we obtain water from a water-delivery truck, but this service is not as regular



as it could be! Water shortages unfortunately result in poor yield. From time to time, this situation compels me to buy high quality food to feed all my animals, and this can be very costly.

With the support of the UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme, Givarette was able to build safe incubators, paddocks for the hens to breed, and learn about the technicalities of landrace chicken rearing. These enclosures are vital to shield small chicks during their first crucial weeks and in times of cyclones and torrential rains.

“ I wish to create an educative space through which I would introduce tourists and locals to free-range chicken farming. Most people do not think beyond the poultry they pick from

supermarket shelves. Education can raise and inculcate environmental sensibility and ethics, such as cultivating crops with organic techniques and farming animals with ethical practices. However, water scarcity remains a roadblock to my project. Our Government must find a sustainable water solution.

I fully encourage women to embark upon eco-sustainable business ventures. It is a challenge, particularly for women, and entails financial risks, but it is purposeful and rewarding! Work hard and work from the heart!”

ECO-FRIENDLY AND BIO-TURMERIC POWDER BUSINESS: THE MIDAS TOUCH OF DENISE



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Known for her proactiveness, 58-year-old Denise, from Mon Plaisir, juggles multiple responsibilities. Between her social work and running a successful family enterprise, she launched a new venture in 2012, entitled ‘Rodrigues Turmeric Producers Association’.

“ My work as a child social worker entails visiting family homes - the majority of which are poor women-headed households. Given my entrepreneurship backdrop, business ideas often crop up in my mind when I spot an opportunity. One of them was the turmeric powder production. One day, I was visiting a poor family and noticed the proliferation of turmeric plants in their garden, and I instantaneously exclaimed: “You must exploit this gold!” And that triggered the formation of the association which is today



composed of 8 board members, all of whom are turmeric planters; and we further buy turmeric roots from 30 people, predominantly women.

Our association lays much emphasis on the bio-quality of the turmeric roots that we buy and transform. They must imperatively be pesticide-free. As an environment advocate, I can proudly share that the overall process of the turmeric powder production is eco-friendly. With the help of Rodrigues Regional Assembly and the UNDP

GEF Small Grants Programme, we acquired an old and unused building converted into our factory, and key materials such as an electric grinder and a solar dryer. We are currently working upon an eco-friendly packaging that will provide information about our bio product with eco-labels, and a brief story about our association and members."

Denise shares that the factory attracts many visitors encompassing school students, officials from the Commission of Agriculture and ministerial delegations, all eager to experience the transformation process of local turmeric clumps into powder. A visionary, Denise seeks to scale up the business with added-value services and products such as turmeric-based massages, turmeric juice and even pharmaceutical turmeric-powder capsules with support from the Centre for Biomedical and Biomaterials Research under the UNDP GEF SGP funding and support from the private sector, IBL Together.

“ *Turmeric is well-known for its various health benefits. It is a powerful anti-inflammatory and antioxidant with skin benefits, and may also help to fight symptoms of depression and arthritis. Scientific research also found that it helps prevent Alzheimer's disease, cancer, and is a proven immune system booster!"*

We seek to expand the association and solicit more people and turmeric planters across Rodrigues Island, to grow and sell their raw produce to us. I am working with the Commission of Agriculture which is ready to help by targeting and training people on how to grow turmeric. Our main targets are women, especially financially struggling women and single mothers. One can earn as much as Rs 10,000 per month by just growing and selling turmeric. It is not a very demanding plant! It is planted in December and comes to maturity in August. It only requires watering in dry climate and occasional weeding."

Prior to COVID-19, the association's production of turmeric powder was estimated at 300 pounds per month. However, due to the lockdown in 2020, all activities were suspended with a financial impact on the planters involved. To be productive, Denise cultivated flowers and vegetables like manioc for sale. The lockdown also allowed her to think about ways to keep developing the association and to produce market-versatile turmeric-based products.

“ *Through this eco-bio turmeric association, I seek to share my Midas touch with other women. The aim is to empower them economically by turning turmeric rhizomes into fine and lucrative yellow powder for both local and global markets. I urge people to take care of the environment and the environment will take care of them. Sustainable eco-friendly enterprises must become the norm.*





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LOCALLY SOURCED MATERIAL FOR A LOW-CARBON BUSINESS: SHANJANA'S SUSTAINABLE CREATIONS

26-year-old Shanjana has a good educational background and experience in product design and corporate sustainability. Working as Project Leader at a Sustainability Consultancy firm in Mauritius, this ambitious young professional woman also wants to exert her knowledge, skills, business acumen and interest in sustainable entrepreneurship, through the launch of her own new enterprise, SANEM (San Embroidery).

“During the one-year interval between the completion of a BSC and enrolling for an MSC, I discovered embroidery and swiftly developed a strong

passion for it. Using fabric remnants from old torn curtains and garments at home, I started improvising new stitches and designs. This revealed stunningly therapeutic and unleashed my hidden creativity.

COVID-19 and the first lockdown imposed in 2020 impacted my livelihood, mental health, work routine and embroidery hobby. Access to imported embroidery threads known as DMC embroidery floss and other materials, was restrained. Paradoxically, the interlude provided time and space to ponder upon new ideas. Having banana plants in my garden, I began experimenting with their fiber and discovered that they were a sustainable local alternative to the imported embroidery threads I previously used. I even tried natural dyes to produce assorted-colored threads and it worked remarkably given that banana fibers are highly absorbent.”

To showcase her embroidery creations, Shanjana uses social media platforms. Her attempt to sell products bearing her creative embroidery has been low scale, but quite rewarding. Recognising her work, a well-known social enterprise engaged in inclusivity and eco-friendly products approached her to contribute to a repair, renew and recycle project. Her tasks entailed sewing holes, and applying visible mending and her embroidery to revive and turn old clothes into value-added products for sale. She also helped in organizing workshops to train participants on how to recycle their own clothes with a tad of creativity.

“ Having had these experiences with this social enterprise, I felt more confident to start marketing my own creations. I have stitched embroidery on bags, pouches, and the next step is to replicate the same using locally sourced banana-fiber for embroidery. The two-pronged business approach is to sell products with my unique Mauritian designs such as our tropical flowers; and to propose embroidery works on other people’s products.”

Growing up in a village surrounded by extensive greenery, the choice of sustainability pervading my studies and career orientation was inherent. It always troubles me when I watch documentaries on melting glaciers and forms of environmental degradation. It brings me a lot of satisfaction to work in sustainability, and I aim for SANEM to become regenerative, that is, to give back to nature what it takes

from her. One day, I would also love to write a guidebook on how to pull off simple to intricate embroidery stitches, including my authentic designs.”

There are multiple hurdles involved in setting up a business venture, especially in the new sustainability market. Shanjana calls upon the Government to recognize youth entrepreneurs who are not only blessed with creative minds and skills, but who fundamentally demonstrate environmental consciousness. She pinpointed that lack of finance, marketing and trade platforms, and business trainings hamper their efforts.

“ Young people, including young women, have brilliant sustainable entrepreneurship ideas. For us, it is not only a remunerative business, but one that seeks to convey a strong message...that we must care and put the environment at the heart of our economy and all economic activities.”



FINDINGS

This newsletter has illustrated ways in which COVID-19 has impacted the livelihood and the work of women in the informal sector in Mauritius and Rodrigues. Our four female informants revealed that the pandemic had an impact on their enterprises and subsequently caused curtailment and major loss of income. Despite the governmental outreach support available for the informal sector, these women could not avoid facing financial problems, mental health issues and stress.

Courageously, our four women entrepreneurs kept looking for solutions, and all shared the ‘no waste’ attitude towards handling their eco-enterprises’ produce. From making personal use of the products, selling some in local markets or sharing the rest in the neighborhood, they all made a judicious use of the lockdown interlude to reflect upon the relaunch of their businesses post-lockdown in smarter ways. One informant, Shanjana, came up with the brilliant idea of substituting imported and chemically processed embroidery threads with eco-sustainable banana fibers which are accessible from her own garden.

Beyond COVID-19, other hindrances that informal female workers face more generally, have been brought to light. These include the lack of social aid to fisher folks during the closure periods of octopus fishing in Rodrigues. As a single mother with a dependent, Danielle stated that the Rs 250 per day compensation is insufficient. It is also highlighted that addressing water scarcity in Rodrigues is long overdue and continues to impact women-led informal businesses in agriculture and farming especially, and the population as a whole. Other issues such as the lack of sustainable development and successive job creation in Rodrigues limit career prospects for young people, who subsequently get trapped in low-remunerated informal jobs and poverty.

Key areas identified for policy intervention encompass (i) the recognition of the pivotal roles that young female entrepreneurs play in the green and informal sector; (ii) the recognition that the ecological nature of some informal enterprises are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); (iii) access to targeted financial aid; (iv) access to business training and capacity building; (v) access to local and global trade and marketing platforms; and (vi) incentives to encourage informal workers to register their businesses and participate to their full capacity in the formal economy for more inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Targeted gender responses at policy level can eliminate gendered barriers in economy, and empower women entrepreneurs at cross-cutting levels in the eco-business domain, whether they opt to remain in the informal sector or transit to the formal sector, for immediate and long-term benefits for women and sustainable economic growth.







ISSUE 04/VOLUME 2 » 06/2021

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