

# Evaluation Matters: Evaluation of the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) Program



## THE EVALUATION

**Why:** The evaluation assessed how successful AWE is in meeting program objectives, the program's influence on 2019 alumnae and their businesses, determined if and how AWE furthers networking among participants and alumnae from AWE and other ECA supported programs, and identified best practices and lessons learned for improving the program.

**What:** The evaluation addresses four overarching questions:

1. To what extent is AWE meeting its objectives of empowering women entrepreneurs?

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## THE PROGRAM

The U.S. Department of State's (DOS) Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) established the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) Program in 2019 to provide women entrepreneurs around the world with the knowledge, networks and access they need to launch and scale successful businesses. U.S. Embassies' Public Diplomacy Sections design and implement their own AWE model based on local conditions, contacts, networks, and needs. The core of the AWE model is the DreamBuilder online course, which implementing partners (IP) supplement with a variety of content such as guest speakers, presentations, and site visits. DreamBuilder is an online entrepreneurship training program for women, developed through a partnership between Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management and global copper mining company Freeport-McMoRan.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- » **Empowering women entrepreneurs:** AWE appears to have fundamentally changed alumnae's knowledge, attitudes, and practices, providing a foundation upon which alumnae could effectively build their businesses. Among AWE alumnae survey respondents who track their business metrics, 74 percent reported increased revenue since participating in AWE. Forty-four percent reported adding one or more products or services. Twenty-nine percent of alumnae said they had increased their number of employees. COVID-19 posed a significant challenge for most women, whether preventing them from starting a business or acting on their Business Action Plan. However, 67 percent of survey respondents agreed that knowledge gained during AWE helped them adjust to COVID-19.
- » **Access to business networks and resources:** Alumnae reported frequent contact with peer networks, which they utilized for friendship (58 percent), emotional support (36 percent), and professional information (33 percent), including business opportunities. Meanwhile, 39 percent of alumnae contacted their AWE mentors at least once a month, predominantly receiving similar types of support. More than half of alumnae (53 percent) reported contacting cohort peers at least once a week, demonstrating the sustainability of these networks more than a year post-program. While some alumnae participated in select activities after completing AWE, most alumnae did not report receiving post-program support, maintaining engagement with the embassy, or serving as mentors to the 2020 cohort.
- » **Best practices of AWE:** In 2019, AWE program configurations across countries (and in some cases specific cities) varied widely. Alumnae noted specific program components that supported parts of their business implementation, especially DreamBuilder, mentorship, and networking activities. Speakers/



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## THE EVALUATION

2. How has participation in AWE affected alumnae's access to business networks and resources?
3. What best practices of AWE should ECA share with U.S. embassies and local implementing partners as the program continues to expand?
4. To what extent is AWE contributing to the Women's Global Development and Prosperity mission of increased global peace and stability and economic prosperity?

Who: ECA's Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Innovation Unit contracted Social Impact (SI) to conduct the evaluation.

When: August 2020 through July 2021

How Much: \$456,727

external presenters and trainings/workshops also contributed to business success. Alumnae interviewees preferred in-person activities. In-person support, speakers, and classroom discussions all helped clarify DreamBuilder materials and enhance content. Alumnae also preferred a cohort reflecting diverse sectors, business experience levels, and an appropriate size (18–36 participants) to facilitate strong connections and networking as well as fruitful interactions with facilitators.

- » **Contribution to global peace and security and economic prosperity:** Embassy, IP, and alumnae respondents believed that AWE is contributing to economic growth. This is most evident in most alumnae interviewees and almost half of IPs noting AWE's benefit to alumnae's communities. The most important benefit is increased employment and economic development. Likewise, 98 percent of all survey respondents said their view of the U.S. was more favorable or remained favorable after AWE.

## INTEGRATING RECOMMENDATIONS

- » **Contextualize and localize content to the local business context:** ECA has updated program guidance that includes best practices in contextualizing/localizing local business context in the upcoming facilitator training for U.S. embassies and implementing partners. The program will maintain flexibility, however, in allowing each country to select the best program mechanism to implement this recommendation. For example, in some countries, mentors and/or speakers may support the incorporation of these components to the AWE program.
- » **Engage experienced mentors, ideally with entrepreneurial and local business experience:** ECA is encouraging AWE IPs to better leverage ECA alumni for mentorship, beginning with the 2022 cohort. ECA has updated the 2022 call for proposals, program guidelines and facilitator training materials to include further opportunities and post-program roles for ECA alumni in the AWE program.
- » **Seek and develop relationships with local financial institutions and host country governments that support women's entrepreneurship to enhance participants' access to funding:** ECA will continue to encourage U.S. embassies and IPs to develop external partnerships to strengthen and augment their programs, while continuing to work with ECA's Public Private Partnership Unit to identify additional partnership opportunities.
- » **Provide internet access and computers in contexts where the COVID-19 constraints persist:** ECA will allow the use of local AWE budgets for the purchase of internet access as well as internet-enabled devices. Additionally, ECA has included this recommendation in an AWE implementation best practices document that was disseminated to U.S. embassies and implementing partners.
- » **Integrate ECA program alumni into program delivery as mentors, speakers, and facilitators, and via networking opportunities:** ECA has updated program guidance to require the involvement and engagement of ECA alumni in the AWE program. The program will however, continue to maintain the flexibility in allowing U.S. embassies and local implementing partners to identify the best mechanism to engage and involve ECA alumni in the AWE program.
- » **Include a wide variety of components to complement DreamBuilder, tailored to the context and alumnae's specific needs:** ECA has provided U.S. embassies and local implementing partners with a document outlining implementation best practices as identified by this evaluation.