

CONSTRUCTIVE CONNECTIONS IN COSTA RICA

How the WeConnect International program helped Madelaine Artavia Sotela grow her construction company.

POSTED BY ALANNA MITCHELL ON OCTOBER 18, 2017

Madelaine Artavia Sotela, 38, can divide the trajectory of her construction business in Costa Rica into two distinct parts: before she became involved in WEConnect and after.

It got a lot better after. In 2014, she had five employees. Today, now that she has won construction contracts through her involvement with WEConnect, she has 15, plus another 10 who work for her as needed.

“It changed my life totally,” Artavia Sotela says. “Everything has been easier since then.”

Launched in 2009, [WEConnect International](#) matches businesses owned by women with multinational corporations that want to buy more services from women. Currently, woman-owned businesses garner less than one per cent of money corporations and governments spend globally on goods and services, according to WEConnect research.

Bumping that up is part of a trend among larger corporations to diversify their supply chains. The idea is not only to encourage more women to operate and grow businesses, and therefore build local economies, but also to expose corporations to a richer range of ideas. It’s a classic win-win.

The problem was that even though corporations wanted to buy from businesses run by women, they had a tough time finding those businesses. Not only that, but how did they know that a business that claimed to be owned by women really was?

WEConnect stepped in with a program to identify, register and certify businesses owned by women across the world, as well as offering education and training. The result is a database that corporate members can consult to find the suppliers they want.

Today, woman-owned businesses in more than 100 countries are involved with WEConnect. Together, those countries represent 60 per cent of the global population. More than 5,000 businesses have registered and about 750 have paid to be certified, which means they undergo an assessment by WEConnect to check that they are owned and managed primarily by women. (The certification fee varies by country.)

Multinational companies pay an annual fee ranging from US\$15,000 to US\$35,000 to belong to WEConnect, giving them access to the database and sometimes representatives on the organization’s national advisory councils. Among those who have joined are Apple, IBM, Boeing, Delta, Walmart, Toronto Dominion Bank and Marriott International.

WEConnect’s most detailed work so far has been in [India](#), says Arjan de Haan, program leader of employment and growth for the [International Development Research Centre](#), which provided \$500,000 to support the project’s early work and another \$350,000 to expand it in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Latin America, the database unleashed energy that was “already bubbling up,” de Haan says.



Madelaine Artavia Sotela at a construction site in Costa Rica. Artavia Sotela started her own construction company in 2002 and has since watched it grow, thanks in part to the WEConnect International program. (Photo: Madelaine Artavia Sotela)

Artavia Sotela’s story is a case in point. Not only did she face barriers to getting lucrative construction contracts, but she also broke stereotypes to set up her company, *Arquitectura Arquenz*, in the first place. The construction industry in Costa Rica is “macho,” she explains.

Nevertheless, she had had a passion for construction from the time she was a small child. Her father was a construction foreman who used to take her to his work sites. By 2002, she was an architectural drafter and single mother who was working at home, dreaming of becoming an architect. One female client loved her drafts and asked her to build the home she had drawn. That same year, Artavia Sotela decided to start a construction business to honour her father who had just had a stroke and was no longer able to work.

It took her until 2012 to graduate as an architect, running her construction company all the while. She soon encountered WEConnect at a networking event and was certified by 2014. Immediately, she got a passport and visa, boarded her first airplane and landed in Miami where she attended a huge construction conference. Among the companies there was the hotelier Marriott International. Within months, she had her first big contract with that firm.

She has made a point of hiring women to jobs including painting and plumbing, a shock to her male employees. But they got used to it. Today, she has four women on the payroll.

“I have been inspired to include more women in my work,” she says. “I believe that in a world full of machismo, women can do whatever we want to do.”

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READING AS THINKING

1. a) Skim the article and highlight keywords. Sort the words into themes below.

- b) Based on the highlighted keywords, what is the writer's main message?

2. If you were to add another photo to the article, what would it depict and what would its caption be? Justify your choices.

3. Explain how WEConnect changed Madelaine Artavia Sotela's construction business.

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4. What were some of the challenges faced by corporations who wanted to buy from businesses run by women? How were these challenges addressed?

5. What are some benefits and challenges of a business becoming certified by WEConnect?

6. Artavia Sotela mentions that she broke through stereotypes to set up her company. What do you think those stereotypes might have been and what effect do you think they might have had?

7. Explain what this quote from Artavia Sotela means to you: "I believe that in a world full of machismo, women can do whatever we want to do."

Think-Pair-Share

8. *Think*
Choose a female entrepreneur and make a timeline of her life. Include the challenges she faced as well as her successes. Make links between the context (location, era, social status, legal rights, etc.) and the challenges and successes.

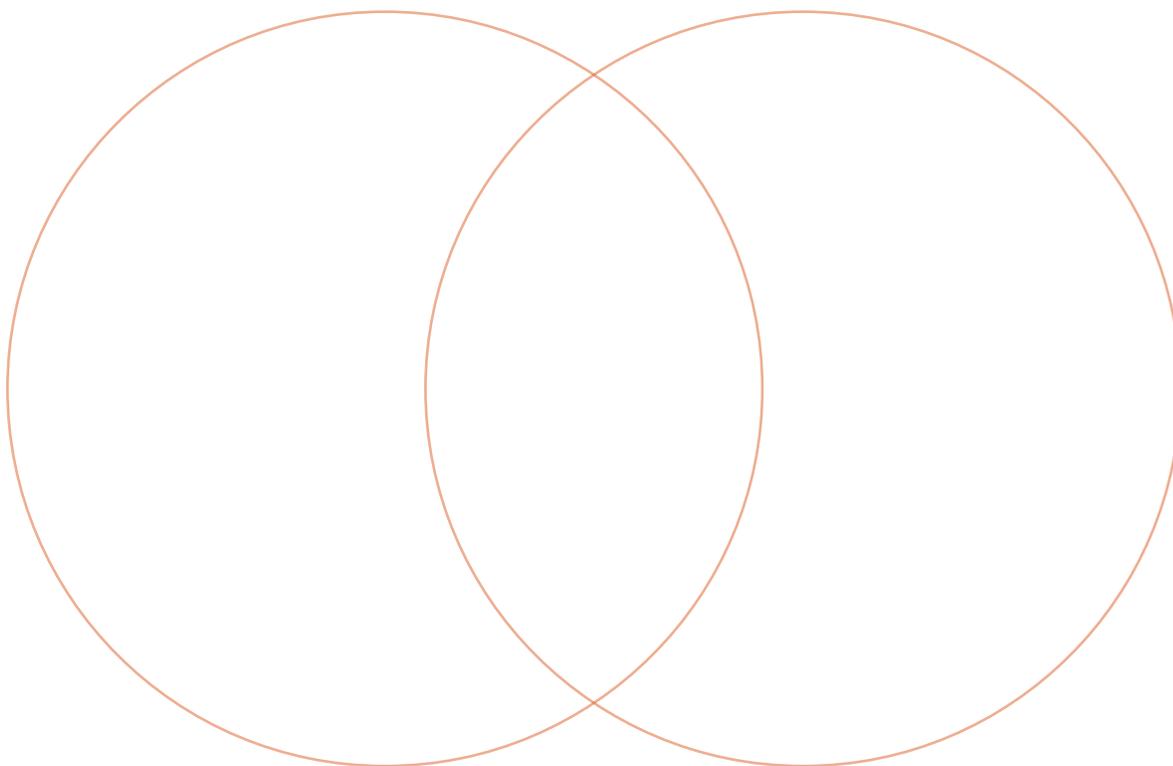
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9. *Pair*

Compare your entrepreneur's timeline with a classmate's. What is the same and what is different? Do their origins affect their success? If so, how?



10. *Share*

Present your comparison to the class and discuss how an initiative such as WEConnect could have changed the course of the entrepreneur's business.

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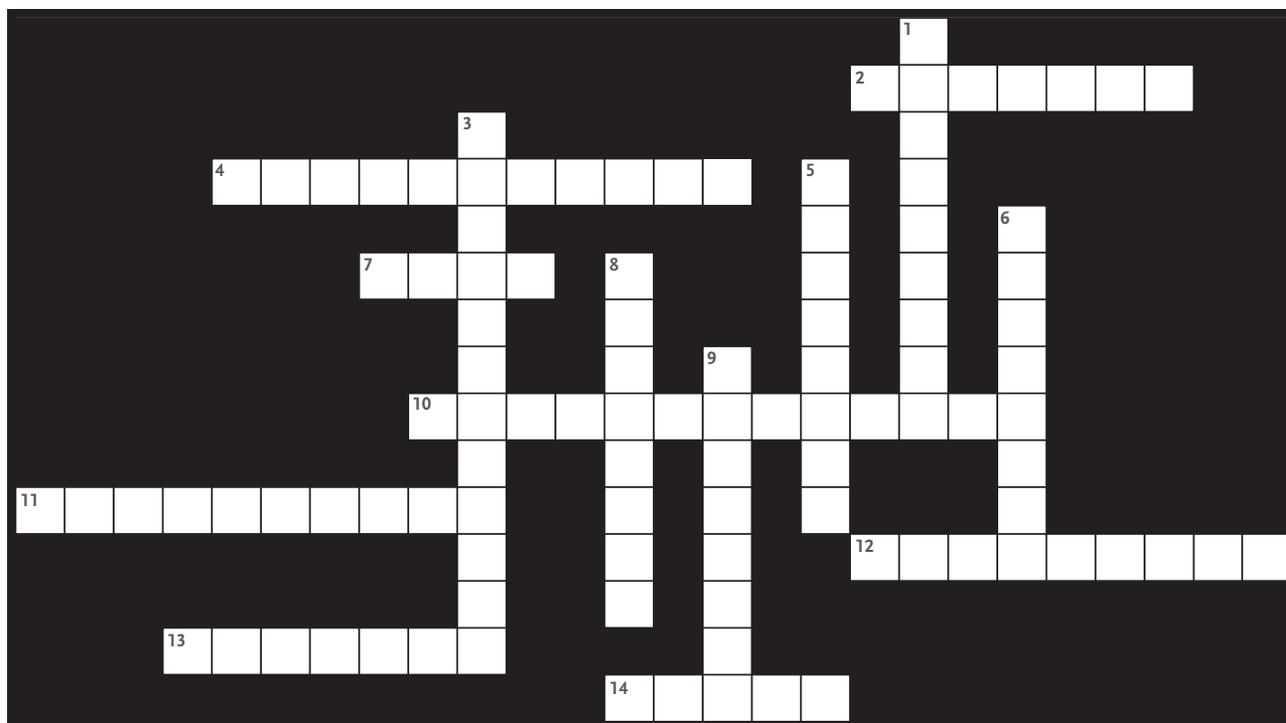
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ONLINE

1. Using [Google Maps](#), locate Costa Rica and explore the country by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools, find the following:
 - a) The population
 - b) The capital city
 - c) The neighbouring countries
 - d) Major bodies of water
2. Watch this [video](#) in the article and think of the benefits of WEConnect.
3. [Read more](#) or [watch more](#) about how WEConnect has helped India's female entrepreneurs.
4. Take this [quiz](#) to see if you have what it takes to be an entrepreneur.
5. Picture a surgeon, a firefighter and a fighter pilot. Now watch this [video](#). Whom did you imagine?
6. [Read](#) about why we gender-stereotype jobs.

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CROSSWORD:

Across

2. Employees who are paid can be said to be on this
4. Artavia Sotela broke this to set up her construction company
7. Artavia Sotela needed a passport and this when she went to Miami for a huge construction conference
10. International
11. Evaluation
12. Well-paid
13. Artavia Sotela's father held this position in construction
14. Tendency

Down

1. The IDRC provided an additional \$350,000 to expand WEConnect in Latin America and in this particular region
3. Artavia Sotela started this type of business to honour her father
5. Artavia Sotela makes a point of hiring women to this job
6. A person who owns or manages a hotel
8. A type of council that gives recommendations
9. When multinational companies pay their annual fee to belong to WEConnect, they are given access to this