

A professional portrait of Mary Ellen Iskenderian, CEO of Women's World Banking. She is a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a white blazer over a dark top with a patterned scarf. Her arms are crossed. The background is a plain, light gray.

POWER

in Number

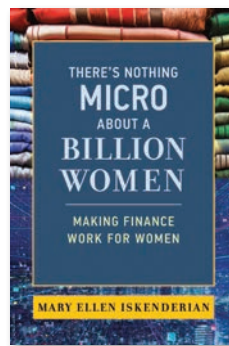
*Women's World Banking CEO, Mary Ellen Iskenderian,
is changing the game for low-income women.*

PHOTO BY CEOPORTAITS.COM

MARY ELLEN ISKENDERIAN is the president and CEO of Women's World Banking, a global nonprofit devoted to giving more low-income women access to financial tools and resources they need for both security and prosperity. Her newly published book, *There's Nothing Micro About a Billion Women: Making Finance Work for Women*, demonstrates her passionate advocacy for women's economic empowerment. As a leading voice for women's leadership in financial services, Iskenderian urges banks and financial institutions to view women as a powerful market of entrepreneurs. Iskenderian is a permanent member of the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as a member of the Women's Forum of New York and the UN's Business and Sustainable Development Commission. She serves on the board of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

I have been a banker, of one kind or another, for my entire career. I started in Bank of America's credit training program, followed by a short stint in the bank's international trade finance group before jumping to the fast-paced, foul-mouthed foreign currency trading desk. After earning my M.B.A., I joined the mergers and acquisitions department at the investment banking firm Lehman Brothers. I had taken these jobs quite deliberately, convinced that I could hone my finance skills working with investors, banks, and governments to drive positive change in the developing world.

I had my first lesson in the power of finance to change people's lives when a large truck manufacturer hired the firm to identify companies that might be potential acquisition candidates. I asked the analyst I was working with to model the financial implications of the various business



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combinations. As I peered over his shoulder at the computer screen, he scrolled down to a single number at the bottom of each column, a different five-figure number for each of the various combinations—that was the “plug figure” he used to get the balance sheets to balance. In this case, the so-called “plug” represented the number of jobs the company would have to eliminate to make the deal work.

I was deeply shaken by this wake-up call and, while I still retained my faith that I could work for positive change through a finance career, I knew I would need to look beyond Wall Street. The search led me to join the World Bank, just a few months before the Berlin Wall fell. I spent the next eight years working in Central and Eastern Europe and, eventually, the former Soviet Union. My Wall Street skills turned out to be in demand as we worked to rebuild financial systems and institutions that had atrophied or disappeared during the long years of communist rule. And I saw, for the first time, that finance could be a force for good in people's lives. I met countless fledgling entrepreneurs who were amazed to discover that a bank could be a partner by providing access to capital and helping them achieve their dreams.



Iskenderian speaking at TEDxWallStreet

But not once in all the years I worked for the World Bank did I, or anyone I worked with, ever ask how many women clients were served by the financial institutions we were lending to. I never questioned whether the benefits of the investments I made as part of the premier development organization in the world were equally distributed between men and women.

In 2006, I was recruited to run Women's World Banking, a global nonprofit organization. I had seen the difference that gaining access to finance had made in the lives of millions of people around the world. But I still hadn't grasped how much more effective and impactful my World Bank investments might have been had they considered the different needs of women.

Founded at the first UN Conference on Women in 1975, Women's World Banking is dedicated to ensuring access to financial products and services for low-income women in the developing world. My first trip in this new role was a crash course on what was possible when women were intentionally included in the design and delivery of financial services.

Traveling to East and West Africa, I met some of the women clients who were served by Women's World Banking's partners, including a Kenyan entrepreneur named Joyce Wafuko. Seeing Joyce in her small office at the back of the hardware store she owns, it would be difficult to imagine the road she traveled. Joyce lives in a small village outside Mombasa, Kenya's second-largest city, where she and her husband had settled a decade earlier to

raise their three children. After a few years, her husband was unable to find steady work in the village and reluctantly went to the city to become a policeman. But the money he sent home wasn't enough to support their family, so Joyce decided to start a business to supplement his earnings. She noticed that her neighbors lacked the supplies to make even the most basic repairs to their homes, so she thought a hardware store would be a good addition to the village.

Joyce was a member of an informal savings and loan group with other women from her village, but the amount she was able to borrow according to the rules of the group was relatively small and not enough to launch her business. When she asked about a larger loan at the local bank branch, the manager told her they didn't finance "start-ups" and that she should come back after the business was up and running. When it was her turn to take home the monthly "pot" from her savings group, she put most of the money into starting her business. Joyce keeps a photograph of her first shop pinned to the corkboard in her office. It shows a small, corrugated metal shack on the side of the road with a



Ela Bhatt, Michaela Walsh, Iskenderian, and Jayshree Vyas

smiling Joyce standing beside her inventory: some two-by-fours, loose nails, eggs, and tomatoes.

After operating this stand for a few months, Joyce heard about a microfinance program called Kenya Women Microfinance Bank a couple miles from her home and applied for a loan. The bank gave her a \$70 loan and some training in book-keeping and budgeting, which she parlayed into a booming hardware business that, seven years later, sells a full range of home improvement tools and housewares. Joyce is still a client of Kenya Women's and maintains a \$3,000 revolving line of credit with the bank.

Joyce now employs 25 people, mostly women, but she is especially proud of her newest employee: her husband. He came home to work with Joyce on expanding into a new side business, a lumberyard and construction company. Almost in the same breath that Joyce describes these outward, commercial signs of growth and prosperity, she begins to talk about the investments she has made in her family's well-being. It's clear that both represent measures of success. Most notably, she points with pride to the fact that all three of her children have completed secondary school and are weighing different options for continuing their education.

Joyce opened my eyes to the fact that without giving women control over their financial lives, all the other economic development goals—better education, health care and nutrition, clean water—would remain out of reach. For finance to be a force for good in the world, women must have

the same access to and control over financial resources as men. The way that women spend, save, and invest money is profoundly different than the way men do. And it is precisely those differences that are the key to making finance an agent of transformative change.

Since joining Women's World Banking, I travel extensively, meeting as many of our local partners and their clients as possible. I listen to women, who, like Joyce, express enormous pride in their businesses and the ways that their success has helped their children. They describe how hard it's been to get the money together to start a business, and the difference a loan or a safe place to save has made in their lives. Often the services represent the first opportunity for these women to gain some financial independence.

Ensuring that women are full partners in the financial system has become my life's work. Its benefits go beyond any individual woman's circumstances. Women's financial inclusion improves the lives of women and the lives of all of those around them while strengthening communities, financial institutions, and national economies. **LM**