



## Season 3, Episode 3 – Gender Equality & Purchasing Power

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[Music]

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Welcome to the global careers podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER – THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host! In season three, we explore the rising trend of ESG and how it is shifting the talent landscape on a global scale. Come with us as we share with you how responsible active engagement is changing the face of the global workforce today. Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Elizabeth Vasquez, the CEO and Co-founder of WEConnect International – a global nonprofit organization that connects women-owned businesses to qualified buyers in country and around the world. As the head of the organization, Elizabeth is responsible for mission delivery and measurable impact, working with some of the largest multinational companies, NGOs and governments in 130 countries. Elizabeth is a sought-after speaker and thought leader on women's economic empowerment, and global supplier diversity and inclusion. She's also the co-author of the book "*Buying for Impact: How to Buy from Women and Change Our World*". Welcome, Elizabeth, it is a pleasure to have you with us today.

### **Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Thank you for the invitation, Stacie, I'm really looking forward to our discussion on global careers.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, well, one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. You're the CEO and Co-founder of WEConnect International – a nonprofit organization that drives money into the hands of women business owners. Tell us about your organization and what you do.

### **Elizabeth Vazquez:**

WEConnect international as a global nonprofit focused on getting more money into the hands of women. And we do this by connecting very large buyers across all industries such as Walmart, Intel, Google, JP Morgan Chase, with women who own businesses that are registered in our online database, which is free, our member buyer search for these businesses, which are based in over 130 countries. And we can also certify that businesses are at least 51%, owned, managed, and controlled by one or more women in over 50 countries.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Wow, that's great, fantastic for women business owners around the world. So, in running this international organization, you are helping these women-owned businesses. How did you start a global organization? Wow, 50 countries where women are certified working in 130, with different large organizations... Did you have an international career or job or role beforehand?

### **Elizabeth Vazquez:**

So, when I was a student, I honestly could not even have imagined doing what I do today because my job just didn't exist. I actually created my job when I was running another global nonprofit focused on the needs of growth-oriented women-owned businesses. And at the time, everyone was really obsessed with micro finance. But when I



talked with women who owned businesses around the world, what they wanted most was to sell their stuff. And so I started talking with large American corporations that had a need to diversify their global supply chains. And a few years later, we worked together to launch WEConnect International to make it easier for this demand to connect with women and suppliers.

**Stacie Berdan:**

I love it. So you identified a need and filled it, which is of course the best way to become an entrepreneur and start a business. That's terrific, really cool. So, you're based in DC, I know, and the organization is international, yet you focus on women-owned businesses outside the US. And I know you describe filling that need but there's also a need for women owned-businesses in the US too. So why just outside?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

You're right. Women-owned businesses everywhere need an equal opportunity to compete and win. And when we started 12 years ago, there was an incredible nonprofit called WBENC. And there they were already certifying women-owned enterprises based in the US and then connecting them with their member buyers. About a dozen of their very large member buyers wanted to buy from women and businesses in all of the countries where they do business. But at the time, WBENC was focused only on the US and so we agreed to create a separate legal entity that would provide complimentary education and certification services to women-owned businesses that were based outside of the US. And we continue to collaborate very closely to this day with us focusing on international and WBENC focusing on the US.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Ah, that's a great story. Of course just like a woman, not just getting in there and being competitive, but actually complementing what another organization is doing. That's, that's terrific. You know, I meet many people who dream of starting their own business and being a CEO, I've done both. What advice do you have to offer our listeners?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

I always recommend that someone, anyone thinks really hard about what drives you, what gives your life purpose, what gets you excited about getting up in the morning, and then try to build a career around those motivations. It's an exciting but often overwhelming process, because you're putting yourself first so that you can serve others. All successful entrepreneurs are driven by passion, or necessity, or both. And that drive is what will get you through all of those No's that you're going to hear from others, and all the doubts, you're going to hear from yourself. But if you stay focused, and if you take the time to constantly study the pain points in your target markets, so that you can anticipate needs and provide relevant solutions, you will be successful.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's great. And clearly your passion is gender equality, which is one of the UN Sustainability Goals. Why does it matter? Why are you so passionate about it?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

It matters because we simply can't afford to leave half of our population on the sidelines, everyone should have an equal opportunity to contribute to and benefit from economic development. And when women succeed, everyone is better off because of the way women reinvest their income into their families and communities. Women who own businesses, for example, are uniquely positioned to help us achieve the sustainable development goals because of the way most women build businesses that simply do no harm. They hire people who need jobs, and they deliver solutions to the challenges that other businesses fail to address.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's really interesting, and certainly filling a need. But for our listeners, what can they do to make a difference?



**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Yeah, I think part of it is just recognizing that everyone has gifts, everyone has special talents, and that we should be making sure everyone is able to make those contributions. And I think anyone who's focused on working with the best people, they're going to surround themselves with the men, the women, the non-binary people who can get the job done. And the more we have people around us who think differently, who look different, who've had different experiences, it's those unique perspectives that usually create the best solutions, because everyone's thinking of it from a different perspective and a different experience.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, and so, specifically – for just kind of building on that – I would think that some of our listeners who maybe are interested in procurement, supply chain, the finance side, they can do their part directly by opening up and broadening who they purchase from within a company. Right?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Absolutely. Because I think historically, we've really thought about inclusion in terms of who we hire. And that's important, of course, HR is an important aspect of how we run our organizations. But at the end of the day, it's how we spend our money. That's really what says the most about what we care about. And we as individuals have purchasing power, and we as leaders of organizations have purchasing power. So if everyone was more conscious about how we spend our money, and making sure that at least some of that money is going to the communities we care about, including the women of the world, then we will be able to achieve the sustainable development goals you were talking about.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's great. So I want to... I want to talk a little bit about the role of sustainability and ESG. What do students need to focus on as they enter the workforce in these topics?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Well, sustainability and ESG are major drivers of business today. Anyone with a strong understanding of why these values are important, and more importantly, how to implement them into an organization as part of its DNA and not just some side program, those people will be successful. Businesses need a lot more ESG experts to move us from where we are today, to where we need to be in order for us and future generations to not just survive, but to thrive in this increasingly polluted and unequal world. But a world that has so much potential if we just do a better job of taking care of it and the people in it.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Well said. So, in working with people around the world, you don't just work with you know, colleagues, you work with heads of state, Government leaders, some of the most senior professionals in the C suite, NGOs – I imagine you have a lot of insight to share. And this is, again, a big question – but what are some tips that you've learned from working with some of these senior leaders around the world?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Well, first, just remember that these are just people, right? They're just people doing their best to help others. So have fun with it, I always go into a conversation with curiosity, I seek first to understand, and then I feel comfortable sharing how my passions and my experience might complement their work. It's important to listen and to understand what they're saying and why they care about the things they care about, because it makes it easier to have a genuine connection that can lead to a relationship, a relationship based on trust. And trust is absolutely key to any successful relationship.



**Stacie Berdan:**

That's nice, they are just people too. Well said. Elizabeth, what else do you see on the horizon that those entering the workforce in the next year or two need to be aware of.

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

So, try to plan but just know that your plans are going to change, because the organizations that you start or that you're working for their plans are going to change too. The most successful leaders are the ones that are flexible and agile, and that don't get flustered when they have to make a change. Because the world is very dynamic, there's a lot of uncertainty. And a lot of people have a lot of anxiety. And it's important to stay focused on your mission, your job, whatever it is, that's right in front of you, and to be very open minded knowing that new things are going to come at you. And you take all those things as opportunities to innovate, and to come up with new ways to do business even better.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Sounds like a lot of things going on from a global perspective. And this is about global careers. What specific advice do you have for students when it comes to globalization and its effect on the workforce?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

I think, recognizing that globalization is now a part of everyone's life... I think, you know, between COVID and the nightmare in Ukraine and Afghanistan and many other places – it's obvious that what happens on the other side of the world will have an impact on wherever you're standing. And that what we do here has an impact on the rest of the world. And so, I think anyone in a global career needs to try to stay optimistic. But also, you know, be fearless in leading at a time when the world is looking for leadership. A lot of people are looking for direction in such an uncertain world, but trying to, you know, create a sense of organization around it and a path forward – I think that's what everyone is looking for – those voices of people who are willing to take risks, and forge a new way of creating a new world that is more equal and more sustainable.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, and I can see how you are optimistic and it sounds like a risk taker. But we all know that life throws us lots of curveballs. And it's not always fantastic. So, can you share with us one of the most challenging experiences you've had?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

It's probably in the space of women's economic empowerment. I went into it thinking everyone is going to get along, everyone's going to have, you know, a common vision for what equality means and women's empowerment means and then I realized that, actually, a lot of a lot of people in this space don't have the same opinion of how to achieve the goals of equality and of inclusion. And at first, that was very frustrating because it made it hard to build coalitions, when everyone has a different long list of priorities, and it makes it hard to stay focused on the top priorities. But I think that's where, you know, finding, realizing that not everyone is going to work the way that you work and be okay with that. Like, how do you fold into movements for change, people with diverse opinions and diverse experiences, as a way to get even a broader public understanding of the goals and to get buy-in and use that difference of opinion and experience to build the movement and not to keep it from happening?

**Stacie Berdan:**

Hmm, yes, that's great. Sounds a lot like style flexing as you work your way around the world with different audiences and groups. Yeah. So before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add, Elizabeth?

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

I think it's just important to recognize that everyone can be a change agent. I've talked about purchasing power. But sometimes it is as simple as recognizing that how we spend our money can have a huge impact on the world. And I



hope that more people get involved in making sure that how we spend our money is in line with our values and in line with the communities that we care about, because that will fundamentally shift power structures. And I think people that care about global careers, want to understand how power flows, and how to make it more accessible to everyone that we serve. And so I just want everyone to realize that we are very powerful as individuals and as leaders within organizations and that we can be the change we want to see.

**Stacie Berdan:**

This has been fantastic, Elizabeth, I really appreciate your taking the time out of your schedule to talk with me and to share your professional examples and tips with our listeners – really appreciate it. Thanks so much.

**Elizabeth Vazquez:**

Thank you, Stacie.

[Music]

**Stacie Berdan:**

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!