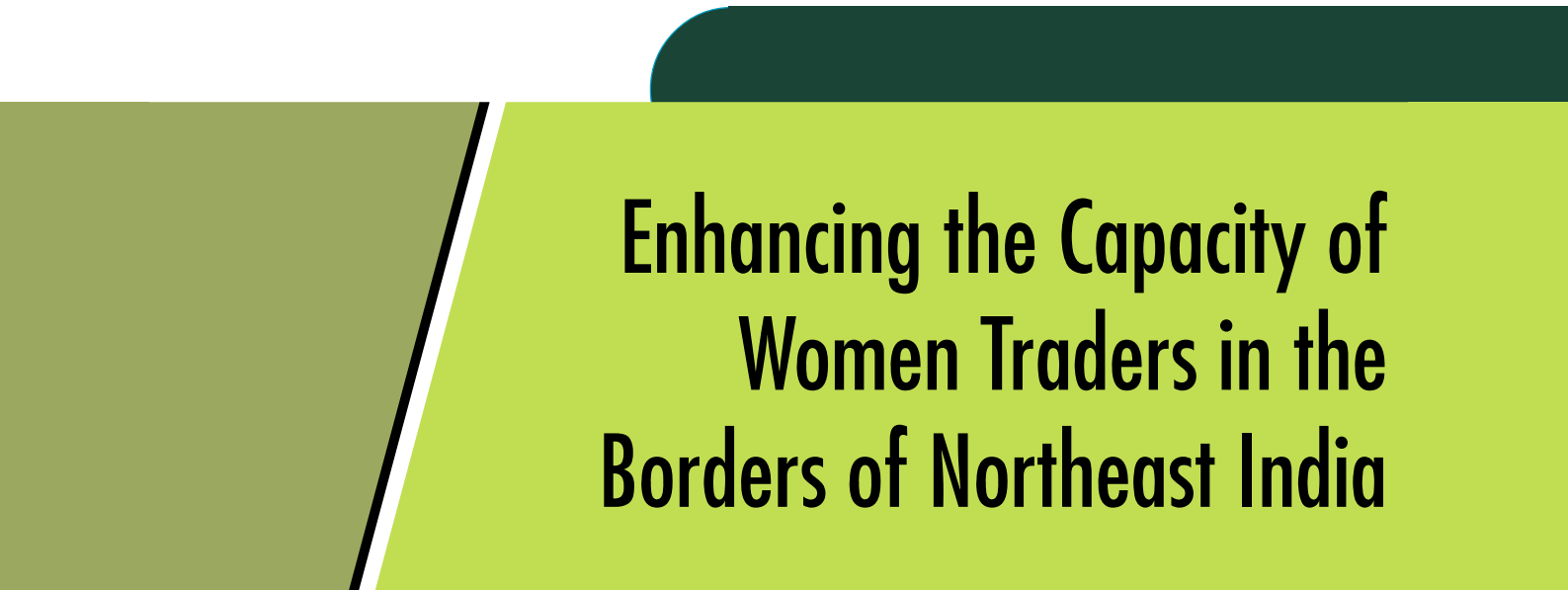


Enhancing the Capacity of Women Traders in the Borders of Northeast India





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Abbreviations

ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
B2B:	Business to Business
DAP:	Direct Aid Program
DFAT:	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DGFT:	Directorate General of Foreign Trade
DIC:	District Industry Centre
FICCI:	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry
FLO:	FICCI Ladies Organisation
ITC:	International Trade Centre
LoC:	Letter of Credit
MSMEs:	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
NEDFi:	North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd
NEN:	North East Network
NGOs:	Non-government Organisations
NTBs:	Non-Tariff Barriers
NTMs:	Non-Tariff Measures
PMMY:	Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana
SBI:	State Bank of India
SDGs:	Sustainable Development Goals
SPS:	Sanitary and Phytosanitary
UN:	United Nations

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This is an output of a project titled “Women Traders in the Borders of Northeast India”, supported by the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, India under its Direct Aid Program (DAP).

This project, with an aim to “create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in the region to greatly participate in cross-border formal trade”, is focused on women traders of selected five northeastern states of India – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Over a period of one year, the project undertook a number of activities, which included field-based research, policy advocacy, awareness generation and capacity building through targeted training programs for women traders.

The project team would like to acknowledge the support availed during the study from various individuals and organisations. First of all, we offer our sincere thanks to the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, India and their financial support and continuous guidance. Special thanks to Pallavi Nayak, Direct Aid Program Administrator, New

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Project Team
CUTS International

Preface

Bipul Chatterjee
Executive Director
CUTS International



Women's active and increased participation in production and trade of goods plays an instrumental role in building a thriving economy, improving their socio-economic status and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Expanding India's economy to its full potential is impossible without creating a level playing field for women's participation in economic activities including trade.

Despite liberalisation of trade and industrial policies in early 1990s, Indian women's participation rate in the labour market and cross-border trade is very low. Societal conventions and gender-neutral policies contribute to this gap. Amongst other factors, women traders and entrepreneurs are held back by lack of information regarding finance, government schemes and potential buyers in other countries.

In India's northeast states, women traders have not been able to fully exploit the opportunities of current international trade possibilities. This is despite the availability of digital technology and presence of online social networks as a new platform to access information and reaches out to a diverse buyer groups across the world.

Hence, CUTS initiated this project to reach identify the challenges faced by women traders located in five of India's northeast states viz. Assam,

Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland. The aim was not only to collect evidence and stories but also to build their capacity to conduct international trade and effectively utilise available schemes and opportunities.

This study reviewed various socio-economic challenges faced by women traders in the given locations, by surveying a number of women-led, managed and owned enterprises. Following that, training programmes on export procedures were organised in all five states. A national dissemination meeting and roundtable discussion led to the development of an action agenda for enhancing women's participation in trade operations.

With increasing focus of the government on Act East, it is the right time to break the *status quo* and provide a platform for women traders so that their active and increased participation in global economy can help India to achieve the target of US\$5tn economy by 2024-25.

I thank the Australian High Commission, New Delhi for supporting this project and our team for their diligent work in this endeavour. I hope that this would be only a precursor to the work that needs to be done to support women traders in fulfilling their potential.

Executive Summary

It is vital to build up women's capability to engage in economic activity and thus, develop the country. In the North East states of India, which have long borders with neighbouring countries and rich natural and cultural resources, the enormous potential for cross-border trade is still underexploited. The macro socio-economic variables including lack of information, access to productive resources and poor infrastructure restrict women traders to participate in cross-border trade or even expansion of their business for domestic market.

It is in this context that CUTS Centre for International Trade, Environment & Economics undertook the study 'Women

Traders in the Borders of North East India' in five North East states—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.

The project team interacted with women traders, prospective traders, entrepreneurs in selected states, government officials, academia and subject experts on gender and entrepreneurship to compile multi-stakeholder views on the status of women traders in these states, their key challenges and opportunities.

These interactions highlighted the need for capacity building of women on the procedures involved in international trade. Therefore, a module for export procedures was prepared and

Table 1: Major Challenges Faced by North East Women Traders

Poor access to timely and sufficient financial products including credit, insurance and subsidies

Low awareness of international trade procedures including standards of other countries, World Trade Organization (WTO) compliance and trade duties

Poor infrastructure and transportation facilities in the North East affect women disproportionately particularly while transporting delicate cargoes or in night time

Women traders tend to be reluctant to scale up, tend towards conventional technology or have low training

Low usage of digital platforms, both due to connectivity issues and due to low risk-taking behaviour of women traders

International exposure is low and networking difficulties remain

with the support of local organisations, five workshops were conducted in the state capitals on export procedures and government schemes for women entrepreneurs.

Table 1 presents some of the socio-economic challenges that women traders and entrepreneurs' face while expanding their business in domestic and international markets.

Many of these challenges are well-known, and the study took the further step of delineating the particular impacts of such issues on women, and the geographical factors that make North East both a rich opportunity and a challenge for the women who want to trade or scale up their businesses.

Using the feedback and insights gained from the interviews and workshops, a National Dissemination Meeting was organised in New Delhi, with a number of stakeholders, including women traders, government officials, non-government organisations and multi-lateral agencies working in the domain of women's economic empowerment. Further, to prepare an action agenda for enhancing the capacities of women traders, a Roundtable was held in Guwahati, Assam. The Action Agenda which delineated both short-term and long-term goals to address the broader needs for North East women traders is summarised below:

Table 2: Key Recommendations to Increase Participation of North East Women Traders

Gender-specific components must be included in trade policies, as well as industrial and other economic policies

State governments, non-governmental organisations and other economic authorities must identify beneficiaries for focussed capacity building programmes for women traders and entrepreneurs

Officials working in government institutions, such as banks, insurance firms, customs and district industrial offices must be sensitised about gender issues

The government should establish more border haats and border markets in states sharing international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh for smaller businesswomen

The states in the North East (excepting Assam) largely have few institutions such as banks that have international banking facilities, or testing laboratories for export goods, thus new institutions must be established and existing institutions must be upgraded with modern facilities

Career training and mentoring women who wish to start trade should include assessments of markets and encouragement to explore non-traditional businesses and product segments, according to market demand

Over a period of one year, CUTS team also identified few successful women entrepreneurs who were able to break the stereotypical situation in trade and economic system and have made marks in their respective fields. A total of five case studies (one from each state) about women traders who are hailed in their states and field for

their contribution to the economy and society have been included in this document.

The findings depicted in this publication have informed our work, and will continue to form the basis for our work on trade and gender issues.

Background

Female participation in the formal sectors of economy is a driver of economic growth, and therefore, inclusion of gender in national economic policies and development plans indicates the potential of a country to grow more rapidly and sustainably. In 2015, United Nations (UN) declared that 'gender equality and empowering all women and girls' is one of the pathways to achieve global prosperity referring it as the 5th Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and 'to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities and equal pay for work of equal value' referring it as 8th SDG (United Nations, 2015).

The participation of women in formal sectors of the economy, for instance in production, export and entrepreneurship vary considerably across developing countries and even within different states/provinces of a country. This variation is driven by a number

of economic, social, political factors like, inequality in education, unequal wages, disproportionate economic growth, differences in stages of development, prevalent social, cultural or patriarchal norms and customs among others. Consequently, the status of women in business ownership and management are more pronounced and disproportional in many countries and states. It has been recognised globally that promoting women entrepreneurship is one of the effective ways to bridge such gender gaps. Further, it will narrow down the gender gaps in the labour market and significantly contribute to the inclusive growth of each country (Strong, 2016).

In the Indian context, the long term trends suggest that some of the northeast states have been considered to be performing better than the rest of the country in terms of gender equality and female workforce participation in the formal sector. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh (35.44 per cent); Manipur (38.56 per cent); Meghalaya (32.67 per cent),

It has been recognised globally that promoting women entrepreneurship is one of the effective ways to bridge such gender gaps



Women traders of vegetables in Ima Keithel in Imphal
(Photo credit: CUTS)

Mizoram (36.16 per cent); and Nagaland (44.74 per cent); had better rates of female work force participation as per National Sample Survey (68th round) in 2011-12 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2017). These figures were found to be higher than the national average at that time (25.51 per cent).¹ Some of the reasons are attributed to the presence of matrilineal societies and the absence of overtly sex-discriminatory rituals such as veiling, female infanticide, and dowry payments in these states.

There is a strong tradition of women earning and developing livelihood strategies in some of the northeast states of India, particularly Meghalaya, Manipur, and Mizoram, where women have strong institutional bases in the market system. For instance, “Ima Keithel” (Mother’s market or all women’s market) of Imphal in the Manipur state of India is well established even in modern market systems. Here, the stalls are run by women and

ownership often passes from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law (Binayak, 2018). Some institutional bases are eroding, as exemplified by the case of rural Khasi women in Meghalaya whose rights over community resources have been gradually taken away or marginalised.

Women entrepreneurship has more potential in the northeastern states than rest of India because of various factors: firstly, there are fewer social and cultural restrictions on women; secondly, the region is surrounded by international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar with high cross-border trade potential; third, the economy is highly dependent upon agriculture, forestry and handicraft sectors with women forming a large section of the working population; and finally, similarities in culture, taste and preferences with neighbouring countries that complement the trading opportunities for women in these states. Despite all these, women

¹ In India, the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) has declined to 23.60 per cent in 2018 as compared to 32.16 per cent in 2005. This is below than some of the neighbouring countries – Bangladesh (35.99 per cent), Bhutan (58.20 per cent), Nepal (81.66 per cent), and South Asian average (26.30 per cent) or world average (47.82 per cent) (World Bank, 2019)

Women in the borders of the northeast region face various socio-economic challenges to participate in trade operations both within the country and across the border

in the borders of the northeast region face various socio-economic challenges to participate in trade operations both within the country and across the border.

Therefore, CUTS International undertook this study on 'Women Traders in the Borders of North East India' under the Direct Aid Program of Australian High Commission, New Delhi in an attempt to understand and assess the prospects and opportunities for women traders in cross-border trade, identify the challenges faced and suggest possible policy interventions that may help women involved in trading activities in the bordering regions of India's northeast states. It is also aimed at facilitating interactive dialogues among women traders in the northeast region of India for awareness generation on trade procedures.

Women working on traditional loom at Kokrajhar, Assam
(Photo credit: CUTS)



About the Study and its Approach

Despite evolving policies on economic growth and development, women's involvement and participation in formalised work and more specifically in trade and entrepreneurship are marked to be low. Though women have always played an important role in the development of economy, their entrepreneurial ability has not been given exposure. They continue to face grave issues, which are heightened for illiterate and semiliterate women. Seemingly gender-neutral policies and programmes have not had the expected impact on women's entrepreneurial progress.

of their family. Other socio-economic constraints, including lack of vocational and practical training, often hamper their progress as a trader despite having significant basic education.

This is also contrary to theoretical work on gender, women education, their work and active participation in economic activities. For instance, a general observation is that there is a relationship between women's education and their participation in economy. As a country's economy grew and women achieve a higher level of education their participation in economic activities increase. It is often referred to as U-shaped relationship (feminisation U-hypothesis theory) (Cain, 1966), (Pieters, 2012); (Klasen, 2014). Although a number of studies (Kaur, 2011); and (Sanghi, 2015) indicate that it is not correct in the case of India and women's participation in formal economy has not increased with the education level.

A general observation is that there is a relationship between women education and their participation in economy

For instance, despite having various credit support schemes to promote women's entrepreneurship, field-level evidence shows that women (particularly first-generation entrepreneurs) are unable to avail those benefits. Women traders and entrepreneurs find it difficult to obtain market-related information, often relying on their husbands or other male members

2 Although, India's northeastern region comprises the eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura according to the Indian Government, but this study was conducted in five selected states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

Given these women-specific constraints, through this study, the aim was to empower the women traders in northeast² region of India so that they can participate in trade within and across borders. This included collecting evidences such as case studies, generating awareness, and building capacity of women traders and entrepreneurs for a better prospect of cross-border trade.

Research Objectives

The study had the following main objectives:

- To understand the participation and engagement of women in trade along northeast India's borders with other Asian countries;
- To understand the opportunities and prospects for women traders on trading and the capacity building required to enhance their participation.

Research Questions

The study explored the following two research questions:

- What are the major hurdles faced by women traders in the northeastern states of India?
- What policies or opportunities already exist that can be used by women traders to address their problems?

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of this project were:

- Increased awareness among the women entrepreneurs about trade facilitation, cross-border trade opportunities and trade prospects that they can explore;
- An enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in the northeast region of India to participate more and more in cross-border formal trade.

National Dissemination Meeting at New Delhi
(Photo credit: CUTS)



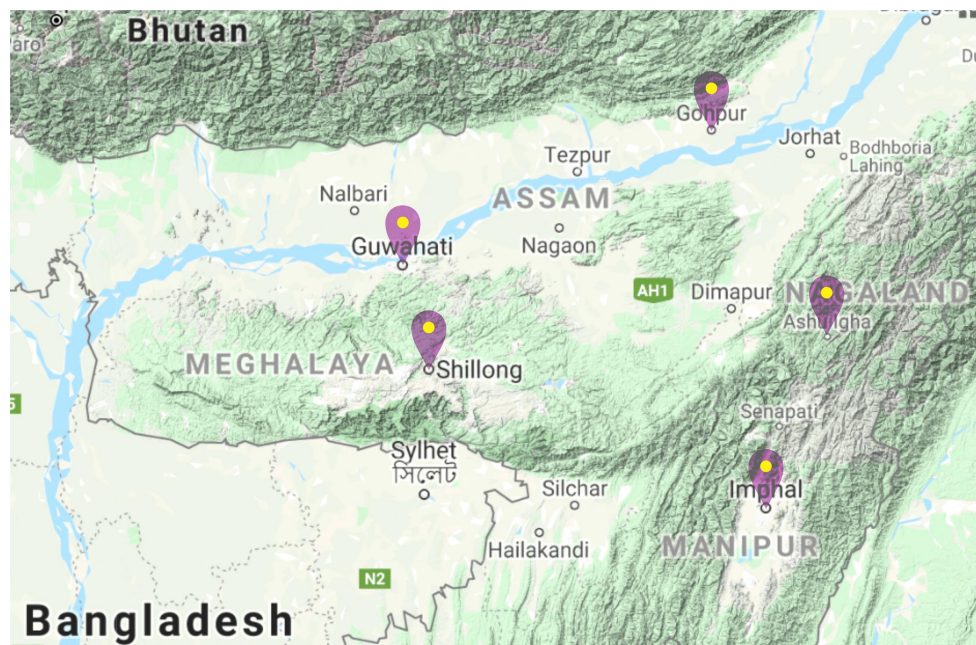
Methodology & Activities

Fieldwork

The study adopted qualitative research methods – a collection of case study and a brief perception survey (semi-structured interviews) of relevant stakeholders. Relevant stakeholders included women traders and entrepreneurs, government officials, representatives from chambers of commerce and industry

associations, academicians, and representatives of non-government organisations (NGOs). More than 100 stakeholders were consulted during the first phase of the study. The fieldwork activities were conducted in five northeastern states of India, that is, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and New Delhi.

Figure 1:
Field Work
Locations in
Five
Northeastern
States



3 For assistance in field work and for organising training programmes, CUTS is deeply grateful for the assistance and collaboration of the following people and/or organisations – Opet Jamoh (Arunachal Pradesh), Grameen Sahara (Assam), Impulse Network (Meghalaya), Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Manipur) and Youthnet (Nagaland).

State-level Workshops for Potential Exporters

Following the fieldwork, CUTS developed a simple module on trade procedures that collated information regarding the major steps of the export process. In collaboration with state-level NGOs³, CUTS organised state-level training workshops-cum-awareness generation programmes in the capital cities of five states wherein the module was shared with participants with added references for their further information. Other than export procedures, trade related development schemes were also discussed in these workshops. A women guest speaker was invited in every workshop to deliver her experience on challenges and opportunities associated with women entrepreneurship. Questionnaire-based feedback forms were used to assess the value addition and benefits the participants perceived from these workshops.

National Dissemination Meeting

Following the workshops, CUTS organised a national dissemination meeting at New Delhi, to inform relevant stakeholders of the findings of the project and invite their viewpoints, for a richer document.

Roundtable for Action Agenda

In order to pave the way ahead in a defined, action-oriented manner, a round table meeting with multiple categories of stakeholders was organised in Guwahati with government officials, private sector participants such as chambers of commerce, women entrepreneurs, civil society organisations from the selected states, to prepare a forward-looking action agenda.

An awareness generation workshop cum training programme on trade procedures in Kohima (Photo credit: CUTS)



**Table 3: Pre-workshop Awareness about Trade Procedures among Women Traders
(in percentage)**

	Understanding of export/import procedures			Knowledge of government schemes specific to women entrepreneurs			Knowledge of export promotion councils/commodity boards etc.			Is there requirement for further workshops?		
States	Yes	No	No Answer	Yes	No	No Answer	Yes	No	No Answer	Yes	No	No Answer
Nagaland	-	33	67	53	40	7	-	100	-	93	7	-
Arunachal Pradesh	-	80	20	-	100	-	-	90	10	100	-	-
Assam	-	60	40	40	50	10	5	95	-	95	-	5
Meghalaya	7	57	36	14	78	8	-	85	15	100	-	-
Manipur	16	57	27	33	67	-	20	80	-	100	-	-

Source: Field survey and workshops in Northeast States, November 2018 - February 2019

Women Traders as an Engine of Economic Growth in Northeast India

Unlike many developing countries, trade liberalisation and economic growth of India has not led to increased employment opportunities for women

International trade plays an important role in achieving the economic growth necessary to end socio-economic inequalities and poverty in developing countries, such as India (World Bank and WTO, 2015). Women's participation in international trade (cross-border trade) can provide sustainability in that growth. This is primarily because income earned by women from trade will lead to disproportionate spent on family and household activities, which will further lead to a spiral effect on economic growth and socio-economic development of a country. For instance, a study found that countries like India with huge unskilled labour and comparative advantage in rudimentary manufacturing products, benefits women from trade liberalisation efforts as they are excessively represented among unskilled workers (Fontana, 2009).

Another study conducted in the context of the US in 2015, estimated that women-owned micro, small and medium (MSMEs) that are in export-oriented business pay wages 1.6

times higher than women-owned MSMEs who are not in export business. Similarly, the study indicated that women-owned MSMEs that are in export-related activities are 3.5 times more productive and employ more than 42 people on an average in comparison to those MSMEs that are not in export-related activities. This signifies that there is an "export premium" in favour of women-owned MSMEs that are involved in international trade-related activities. This also holds true for job creation for women and by women. For instance, an International Trade Centre's (ITC) non-tariff measures (NTM) survey that was conducted in 20 developing countries between 2010 and 2014 reveals that more than 40 per cent women-owned export firms employ more than 60 per cent staff as women while men-owned export firms have around 22-24 per cent of female workers (ITC, 2015).

In this context, India's trade facilitation efforts should also be evaluated. As discussed in the previous section that unlike many developing countries, trade

India understands that women's participation in business and more specifically in trade-related activities leads to an increased growth

liberalisation and economic growth of India has not led to increased employment opportunities for women. But aggregate trends may disguise important heterogeneities that exist in Indian society, different geographical regions and across industries. A study highlighted that since negative technological effects are so high in India that they are counterbalancing the positive effects of trade liberalisation on women's employment. This is primarily because India's export and industrial policies tend to support export of those products that come from skill and capital-intensive industries rather than unskilled-labour intensive industries (Veeramani, 2015).

India also understands that women's participation in business and more specifically in trade-related activities leads to increased growth. This is reflected in the data related to the Government of India's spending on women-specific MSMEs. For instance, the budget for 100 per cent women-specific programme category was increased in 2019-2020 from its 2018-19 level.

While at the same time, it is also true that different geographical regions of India present different pictures of women's participation in trade and business. India's northeast states have strategic locations and share international borders with multiple neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar.

As indicated in Table 3, in Nagaland state, none of the women traders with whom we interacted during fieldwork and workshops had previous knowledge about export promotion councils or commodity boards related to the product, which they produced. Similar situation existed in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with 90 to 95 per cent results respectively. This also indicates that women are unable to get information or assistance from these boards or councils. With regard to knowledge about government schemes related to women traders, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were found to be performing very low. Likewise, when asked about their understanding of export and import procedures, 80 per cent respondents replied with no prior knowledge.

Table 4: Fund Allotment for MSMEs under 100 per cent Women-specific Schemes/Programmes (In INR Crore)

Name of Scheme/Programme	2018-19	2019-2020
Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries	125	125
Market Promotion and Development Assistance	340	350
Prime Ministers Employment Generation Programme	1800	2327

Source: (Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, 2019)

These results indicate that despite the fact that women traders and entrepreneurs constitute an important share in the economy of northeast, their presence is mostly limited to local or regional markets only. With regard to cross-border trade, they not only lag behind in resources but also inadequate information. Although a promising result is that everywhere women traders expressed their willingness to participate in training workshops and capacity building exercises, which are meant specifically for exporters and importers, whether organised by the government or by NGOs.

Fieldwork findings of CUTS reveal that India's northeast has a substantial comparative advantage in the production and trade of a number of sectors that are still untapped from an export point of view. For instance, agriculture food processing industries, clothing and textile industries and creative industries involve a large number of young and motivated women producers and traders.

Food-processing Industries

The northeast states of India have the capacity to develop a profitable cross-border trade in agriculture and horticulture produce such as fresh fruits, vegetables, orchids, flowers, and honey because of similarities in choices, tastes and preferences of consumers in the neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The area produces the best turmeric, ginger, oranges, pineapples and kiwi in the country.

A large area of **Manipur** is under pineapple cultivation and there are many women entrepreneurs in food processing industries who are however, unaware of export procedures for the international market. Thus, their business is confined to local/domestic markets despite

Food processing plant in Imphal, Manipur
(Photo credit: Meira Foods)





Women entrepreneurs at the National Dissemination Meeting in New Delhi (Photo credit: CUTS)

Box 1

High Cost of Packaging Curtails Exports



Meira Foods, a women-owned food-processing MSME based in Imphal, Manipur founded by Ms Hanjabam Shubhra Devi in 2004 produces pickles, candies, heimgang powder and heibi dry with locally available exotic fruits and vegetables located in Manipur. Some of the specific products that have high demand in neighbouring states, such as Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram are – fish pickle, bamboo-shoot pickle, mushroom pickle and ngari pickle. She started her business in 2004 in her own kitchen with three women helpers and today she provides employment to 55 women. She proudly says, ‘there are only three men in my firm and all of them are drivers’. She expanded her business by providing

training to other women in the locality so that they can also produce similar products under the same brand. “We have a lot of fruits in the hills and valley of Manipur yet our market used to be flooded with fruit products from Myanmar, which was substandard because there was no alternative. Now if you go the local market you can see that Meira products are everywhere as people have readily accepted it owing to its quality,” she says.

Taking her business to another level, Shubra has started pineapple processing by tying up with Manipur Organic Mission and has registered as an Organic Food Processor. The firm has the capacity to export pineapple juice and canned pineapple in 50 per cent sugar syrup with minimum investment. The firm received approval from a buyer from Ukraine who tested their product. When it came to price, however, Ukraine is buying from Thailand at approximately INR 24 per can but in Manipur, the total production cost is around INR 45. The reason was the high cost of the packaging, which is INR 20 per piece as packages have to be brought in from Delhi. Although the firm gets pineapple at low prices, the packaging cost is the major concern for them, making their product non-competitive in the international market. Ultimately, they lost out on the export deal.

This case indicates the relevance of establishing ancillary units locally that would supply the bottles, cans and other packaging material for food-processing industries instead of transporting it from far.

having export potential. Apart from lack of awareness about rules and procedures related to exports, there are non-tariff barriers (NTBs) in the form of complicated sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) regulations and standards and certifications.

Since most of the individual farm is scattered and smaller in size, it is challenging to meet the required volume for processing units. In such cases, a cluster approach would be ideal to pool the products for setting up processing units. Another constraint is that the cost of raw material is too high in northeast. The packaging material (bottles, cans and tetra pack) has to come from parts of north India, which adds to the production cost, thus making it non-competitive in the market.

Even buying packaging material from outside is not affordable for start-ups and new players.

Packaging material dealers from other locations ask for bulk orders, which is not feasible for an individual start-up. It is difficult to get a wide range of good quality packaging material according to the different products of different size and quantity

at a reasonable cost. High transportation was highlighted as a major hurdle by women entrepreneurs in the National Dissemination Meeting held at New Delhi.

Handloom Industries

This is one of the major women-intensive sectors in India's northeast states. Weaving is practiced in most of the households in rural areas as a leisure activity. There are a number of women-led cooperative societies in these states to promote weaving activities. They provide training to unskilled workers and after training those women work for the society for a substantial period before moving on to start their own business. They produce hand-woven fabrics based on traditional art and stitch traditional wear, which can be sold in local market as well as neighbouring states.

Many civil society organisations engage with weavers at grassroot level and provide quality raw material and train them in new designs and diversifying products to meet the market demand. But due to limited technical capacity and limited

Box 2

Need for Volume to Meet the Demand

With the aim of preserving the rich legacy of tribal weaving in Meghalaya, Ms Janessaline Pyngrope, founded the Daniel Syiem's Fashion House in 2013, collaborating with her associate Mr Daniel Syiem. She collaborates with 300-400 units of small marginal weavers to creatively combine ethnic weaving into fashion. The weaves are very unique as the natural shades of the fabric, the wefts & warps are different for different weaves depending upon the mood and mental state of the weaver. No two weaves are identical and each woven fabric tells a different story about the weaver. With her efforts, Janessaline has been able to create a niche space for these traditional weaves.

The firm has great potential for exports, as well as domestic demand. However, the biggest challenge to achieve this is the lack of volume to engage in cross-border trade or mass domestic consumption. Brands like Biba and Fabindia have already approached Janessaline to tie up with traditional Meghalayan weavers. But Janessaline and her team are not able to provide the sheer volume of orders requested by these brands as the fabric is hand-woven and consumes a lot of time. They are also wary about the exploitative nature of these big companies.



financial resources they are unable to have a footstep in international markets. As a small group of women workers without adequate financial resources, and trade-related procedures, they cannot compete in a larger market and have restricted themselves to their local market. Another major issue is the constant flux in workers, their workers are seasonal and a number of socio-economic factors keep them engaged in household chores and farming activities.

Creative Industries

The rich cultural resources of India's northeast states can propel the economic growth of the region through export to developed countries.

India was the eighth largest exporter of creative goods globally and third largest among developing countries in 2015 (registering a growth from US\$7.4 billion in 2005 to US\$20.2 billion in 2014 (UNCTAD, 2018) Thus, India has a positive trade balance of creative goods like traditional jewellery, fashion accessories and art crafts leading the exports.

The northeast states have unique traditional arts, crafts, culture and creative industries. The handicrafts from local products have high demand in art-loving communities and as souvenirs for foreign tourists. Bamboo handicraft is emerging as a potential industry in Tripura and Nagaland and a large number of women are involved in preparation of bamboo handicrafts as their tradition. These sectors are of importance to women entrepreneurs particularly, as they employ a large number of women and are sectors that women are comfortable with.

A number of India's northeastern states have vast cultural diversity and a wide array of cultural goods ranging from bamboo crafts, toys, pottery, shell crafts, wood carvings, paintings and so on. Many of these have the potential to be assigned geographical indications as well. But the unique crafts in these states, which are mainly dominated by women artisans have not been explored much. The development of digital outreach of such products could assist in an increase in exports.

Thus, there is a big scope for women entrepreneurs for developing the crafts value chains covering the northeastern states (including traditional products from different tribes). Such a value chain can include the process from production to delivering the products to consumers through different players including third party exporters. It can be a home-based unit or cluster-based unit providing a livelihood to women. The government is already providing promotional schemes for such products but the important work of generating awareness amongst women who require them and would be able to utilise them properly is still remaining.

Box 3

Physical and Digital Connectivity is the Key to Expand Market

North East Network (NEN) is a non-governmental organisation working for women's rights in Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, specifically increasing their involvement and representation in economic processes and initiatives.

NEN in Nagaland in 2008 started 'Chizami Weaves' a rural Naga women farmer-weavers programme with just eight women living in Chizami village in Phek district. Today this line of products – fabrics and furnishings (cushion covers, coasters, wall hangings, mats and table runners), apparel (sarongs, shawls, waistcoats, neckties, mufflers, stoles, dress material) and accessories (pencil cases, cane bags, purses, bags) includes more than 600 women weavers in more than 14 villages. These women grow cotton in their fields or buy yarn and are provided training from Chizami Weaves to make products to patterns and designated sizes, and then they sell such products to Chizami Weaves.

Chizami Weaves not only sells these products in Maharashtra, Delhi, Goa, Karnataka, Assam and Meghalaya but also to the United Kingdom through a third-party exporter – exporter based in Noida (Uttar Pradesh).

In the past, a non-resident Indian (NRI) lady based in London wanted to set up a store to sell traditional Indian products. Thus, she came in touch with NEN/Chizami. Since then Chizami is a regular exporter of these products to the UK. This supply chain model has so far worked well for Chizami but it has a very high difference in the margin as they are not direct exporters to other countries.

In this context, there is a need to mitigate the export challenges Chizami faces. Firstly, the state capital, Kohima, is around 70 km away from the main commercial city of the state – Dimapur, which has the state's only airport. The road conditions and transportation facilities are not acceptable, and heavily slows down commercial movement. Secondly, there is a lack of financing for weavers to be trained at regular intervals in new designs, technology, quality control and enhancement of skills.

They also need to be able to receive and enforce their intellectual property rights over their products as new factories attempt to copy their product lines regularly. Finally, they need to be assisted in getting export/import licence and other necessary licences so that they themselves are able to sell their products in external markets instead of dealing with a long supply chain, which reduces their selling price.



Box 4

Enabling Ecosystem for the Women by the Women

Increasingly well-known in the niche of women entrepreneurs in India, particularly after receiving the 'Vasundhara Award for the North-East Woman Entrepreneur of the Year' in 2018, Kichu has her fingers in numerous pies already at a young age. Her journey began a long time ago, as she always says, earning pocket money as a student by working part-time with a medical distributor. Her first monthly earning was only Rs 600, but it gave her a healthy respect for work and for finding new bars to cross. Along with working a regular job, she also joined Dimapur's Rotary Club. Her leadership skills have been honed in her work in the Rotary Club, where she served as the president for a term, and regularly helped in setting up programmes in health, sanitation, medical camps, as well as other matters. She is also a volunteer coordinator for Ne8x's Nagaland chapter, focused on supporting new entrepreneurs in the northeast.

Her store, Fusion, located in Dimapur opened in 2014 as a family-run business. Her store is already selling products throughout the country, with sales in Delhi, Bangalore, and other major cities via Facebook but she has not yet entered the e-commerce market, although it is on the cards. She pointed out that there was only one e-commerce website in the whole of Nagaland (ilandlo.com) and that it was largely an unexplored area, where she would have to go carefully in order to succeed. Entrepreneurs of any stripe in Nagaland face such problems as there are a few support system to nurture them while they are taking the first steps.

Another major problem was the lack of funding opportunities. She had gained some funding through a loan under the Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) in 2015, through State Bank of India (SBI). The next year she gained higher funding under the scheme, which offers lower interest rates on loans than the market rate. She is not aware of other government schemes for women or for entrepreneurs and does not want to apply for any other scheme as yet, as she has no mentor or training in business and wants to be cautious in extending her business and taking loans that may be difficult to pay off.

A great deal of her merchandise and aesthetics are clearly inspired by Bangkok, China and other East Asian countries, as she herself says, pointing out that her clientele is also very inspired by such styles. However, over the years, more of her products are being bought locally and provided by other Nagaland entrepreneurs, creating a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurs. The jewellery section boasts tags from three different local brands, including Runway and D'ana, with tribal-inspired aesthetics. Other goods like fridge magnets showcasing local cultural motifs are also being manufactured by local entrepreneurs.

Kichu is a prime example of how supporting one single entrepreneur in finding her way actually leads to supporting an ecosystem where many more women entrepreneurs can thrive as well.

Box 5

Each Step Counts for Success

Politician, artist and a first-generation entrepreneur, Nabam from Arunachal Pradesh has had a significant effect in every field she has worked in. She was also awarded the women achiever award – ‘*Be the Change – Stree Udyamita Samman 2016*’ at Guwahati, Assam.

Starting off her career as a celebrated performer, Nabam gradually formed “Khinam Fashion House”, which excels in designing ethnic dresses, jewellery, accessories of Arunachal Pradesh, apart from modern, party outfits and bridal wears on different motifs and fabrics. According to her, although there remain no socio-cultural pressures for young women and promising entrepreneurs to establish their own business, most of them are reluctant in taking up the challenge after marriage in order to prioritise their home.

In Delhi, where she attended sales and fairs of her own volition, she has had trouble selling her goods. She has judged that product type and pricing has had a negative effect on her sales, pointing out that the skirts that many northeast Indian women wear as formal or everyday clothing that she has priced accordingly can only be worn as casual wear by most women in India. She has slowly expanded into using the same type of material and patterns as is traditional in Arunachal Pradesh but creating kurtas and kurtis, handbags, and other such products, which will have broader market appeal in the rest of India. Nabam has been slowly working to modernise and also design mechanised forms of handloom embroideries, such as typical tribal motifs, using her own capital. The range of designs has substantially increased after the inclusion of machine-made handlooms.

She has taken initiative on her own to discover new avenues outside the state where she can market traditional forms of clothing. Information and finance related to national and international fairs are not easily accessible in Arunachal Pradesh, and she herself has to find out information and travel on her own account, as well as study the market and promote the right kind of goods. Although there have been quite a few numbers of schemes launched by the central government, there are hardly any reflections of those at the state level, in terms of implementation. She asserted that international markets in Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar can only be captured with assistance from either government or corporate sponsorships, which remain a far-flung proposition as of now.

Despite these challenges, Nabam is an inspiration to many new entrepreneurs of this small state who are trying to start or expand a business, as she herself makes her way forward and tries to capture a bigger market.

Challenges Faced by Women Traders in the Northeast India

Northeast India's trade potential is undermined by the constraints that women face. The contribution of women traders is much less than it could be in formal export/import because of various specific non-tariff barriers (NTBs), persistent socio-economic barriers and consistent neglect by policymakers. These challenges often push women traders, producers and entrepreneurs into informal trade or necessitate that they limit themselves to a localised market where lack of access to information, resources, finance and networks jeopardise their capacity to expand and connect with the international trade (Paul Brenton, 2013). Without attention to these barriers, India's objective of doubling exports by 2025 to 3.4 per cent from 1.6 per cent in 2018 will not be realised (The Hindu Business Line, 2018); (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India, 2018).

Yet northeast India's women's contribution to international trade, the prospects of their participation, and the challenges they face are typically

overlooked. Despite having potentially competitive businesses due to the production of quality goods at low costs in some sectors, the women traders of northeast India are unable to sell their products in international markets. This has several causes, including their lack of access to reliable data and information, due to institutional challenges and may be partially addressed by a greater representation of women traders in trade policy discussions.

Though all women traders face some common challenges, such as access to legal and accountancy services, a number of challenges are significant or new in these states. For instance, in the states of northeast India, the vast majority of women traders are engaged in weaving-related activities. Their livelihood is heavily dependent on it thus they are afraid of taking any risky expansionary step such as an attempt to export.

Therefore, it was found during the fieldwork in the selected states that instead of targeting women artisans and weavers it would be useful to focus on emerging

women entrepreneurs and those traders who are already trading at domestic levels and looking ways to expand internationally. The following paragraphs focus on the constraints, conditions and challenges faced by women traders in India's northeast.

Financial Constraints

Since most women traders start their business journey either through capital from their family or personal savings, they are unable to expand their business after a certain point. Some who want to expand with formal loans are requested to provide personal collateral, not related to their business. Misleading information about government schemes such as "Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY)" and refusal of financial assistance to women traders by banks in the absence of collateral was reported by entrepreneurs during the field interactions. Hence the implementation of such schemes has to be monitored to maintain transparency.

It was found during fieldwork that a successful large-scale producer of agricultural products in Arunachal Pradesh faced these issues in her initial phase of business but as she was persistent, bank officials and other staff members in various district offices granted her benefits after a prolonged struggle but also requested her to keep it a secret.

As discussed above, the main constraint for women in expanding their formal business beyond the borders is related to the unavailability of finance. Conducting cross-border financial transactions, foreign exchanges and taxation-related issues are cumbersome. For instance, most banks in Bangladesh are private limited banks and they do not have clearing and settlement arrangements with corresponding banks in India for foreign transactions. Apart from it, at a

Women traders in Manipur state explaining their problems
(Photo credit: CUTS)



It is also important to encourage women entrepreneurs to register their firms and do transactions through bank instead of cash as it will help to build their credibility

number of remote locations in northeast Indian states, such as Moreh in Manipur, there are no proper banking facilities. In absence of currency exchange and foreign funds transfer facilities in the border areas, there are informal cross-border financial transactions.

Direct financial support from commercial banks, for women, is still sub-optimal. Women tend to own less property; therefore, commercial loans that require property for collateral assurance are more difficult for women to avail. Another major issue related to finance is a lack of gender sensitisation among bank employees. For instance, it was expressed by a number of women traders during a workshop in Guwahati in Assam that even in cases not concerned with property ownership, bank officials request women to bring male relatives with them. Commercial loans are usually granted only to the husband, brothers or the male member of the family instead of women.

A specific problem related to finance is due to previous risks and non-performing assets of some new traders in some pockets of northeast. For instance, some officials in national commercial banks have developed a blanket judgment about the entire region as prone to default risk and consequently stopped or limited the extension of credit to the new start-ups, which hinders the establishment of many new and emerging women-

owned businesses. It is also important to encourage women entrepreneurs to register their firms and do transactions through the bank instead of cash as it will help to build their credibility.

Lack of Knowledge about Trade Procedures

Although some established women traders know about trade procedures and various development schemes specifically designed for women entrepreneurs, their number is very few. The usual source for getting information about government procedures and schemes are banks and District Industry Centre (DIC). But since these are male-dominated offices, most of the traders face harassment and do not get proper information on time and easily. In fact it was found that most of the business chambers and trade associations of northeast states do not have a significant representation of women in their programme or do not provide timely training/education to entrepreneurs.

Though there are government initiatives to promote women-run businesses at central government level, there are relatively few that are specific to these states, and mostly the initiatives are meant to cover the whole country. As many of the issues that these women face are specific to the northeast states, during implementation of the schemes, gaps remain. It was revealed during the field work that a large number of women traders are not properly aware of the government schemes and programmes available for them and the formal business procedures. It seems that the understanding of women's capacities and where the marketing should be aimed so as to benefit women is still lacking on the government's side.

The gap between men and women's educational progress is also a major issue, which leads to obstacles while setting up and running a business. Women often do not have the capacity to search out whom they should approach for further knowledge. In official transactions, in banks or with agencies, their applications may get refused as they are not aware of how to properly fill them. If



Women traders in Moreh-Tamu border market
(Photo credit: CUTS)

they are not aware of the actual procedures and officials are not sensitive in addressing their capacity constraints, they feel helpless and often decide not to pursue the matter. This particularly causes problems for underprivileged women who may be able to produce goods, particularly traditional handicrafts, but are unable to become entrepreneurs because of such constraints.

A large number of women traders are not properly aware of the government schemes and programmes available for them and the formal business procedures

In remote areas such as Moreh in Manipur, though there is an existing chamber of commerce, women traders are not registered with the apex body and they mostly operate informally. Even in Assam, one can see that many women-operated businesses do not have Udyog Aadhaar or other basic registration. Sometimes, women are so doubtful of their own capacity in dealing with official documents that they do not even attempt to get official registration.

Problems in Getting Necessary Licences and Permissions

This issue is also linked with the problem of getting necessary information about trade procedures and development schemes. As mentioned above, officers in banks, district level offices are not helpful to women traders in some of the northeastern states. This is despite the completion of necessary paperwork and documentation. For example, a handloom producer in Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh waited for two years to get a document to start her business from DIC and District Collector's office.



Awareness workshop in Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh
(Photo credit: CUTS)

Women traders and entrepreneurs from North East states outside Assam find it difficult to access the DGFT for their business

Guwahati has the only Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) office in the entirety of northeast India. Women traders and entrepreneurs from other states find it difficult to access the DGFT for their business. It is not feasible to travel frequently to Guwahati due to poor road connectivity and time constraints, and women particularly tend to have responsibilities in the household that make it difficult for them to travel for long periods or very frequently. Poor internet connectivity and the complexity of documentation make it difficult for women to submit their forms online even where the DGFT allows for it.

It is obligatory for traders to meet the product standards of the importing country and get necessary certifications from the authorised agencies as per SPS certificates. But the absence of plant and animal quarantine stations in large parts of northeast India restricts women traders in food-processing and other agriculture-based sectors. Organic food, plant and animal products are products where the northeast states have a comparative advantage, but the lack of certification stations makes it expensive to receive certification for each shipment.

Traders involved in cross-border international trade often have to make informal payments to various unorganised groups for the clearance of their goods, such as local tribal communities and militants. At times, they also have to bribe police or other official groups. Most women become the victim of such activities and to avoid such trouble they remain limited to domestic markets.

Poor Infrastructure, Transportation and Accessibility

This is an issue, which is very common for both men and women traders in India's northeast states. Since hard infrastructure such as roads is very weak in these states and transportation services are very costly, it increases the cost of production and makes products uncompetitive in external markets. For example, women traders in Nagaland state face such issues every day. The state capital does not have an airport and commercial centres might be far or difficult to access, and public transportation services halt at night, thus it is very tough for them to send their products to destinations on time and at a low cost.

There is no women-friendly infrastructure at trade hubs and border points, therefore, women cannot travel there and must either hire middlemen or lose out on such opportunities

Northeast India is full of unexplored opportunities. It has a rich natural resource base with biodiversity, oil and natural gas, coal, limestone, hydro potential and forest wealth. The region has huge potential for surplus production of spices, fruits & vegetables, flowers and herbs. All these features could make northeast region an entrepreneurship hub but due to lack of investment, infrastructure, and government support, the expected opportunities have not materialised. The northeastern states of India share international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, giving them a strategic advantage in relation to international trade opportunities.

But due to lack of infrastructure, these have not been exploited fully. There is no women-friendly infrastructure at trade hubs and border points, therefore, women cannot travel there and must either hire middlemen or lose out on such opportunities. Other problems also abound such as the absence of women's restrooms, female officials or officials who are trained to be gender-sensitive, guesthouses and public transport that is safe. While the lack of infrastructure can make things difficult for men as well, they affect women disproportionately.

There are relatively few border posts in the states, and many women have to face massive transit and logistical costs if they want to ship their goods internationally. For instance, Ukhrul (in Manipur) shares 200 kms of border with Myanmar. Opening a new border post at Ukhrul will be helpful for access to markets in Myanmar, rather than all traders having to travel to Moreh.

Raw material procurement from different locations of the country and the world is difficult in northeast, considering the inadequate infrastructural and logistical connectivity of the region with other parts of the country. Further, there is also a problem with the procurement of fine quality packaging material in the region.

Awareness workshop in Guwahati, Assam
(Photo credit: CUTS)



Women entrepreneurs often prefer to work in sectors, which have traditionally been women-centric and require low skills, However, they face difficulties in finding skilled labour

Manufacturers need to transport from other parts of India, which affects the price of their product. Ultimately, the non-competitive price reduces its market.

Issues Related to Training and Technological Advancements

Most of our informants either make their products themselves or have a limited number of local staff members. This causes problems in keeping up with consumer demand and preferences. Staff members need to be trained at regular intervals in new designs, technologies, and quality control as well as to enhance their existing skills. For example, a leading women entrepreneurs' body in Nagaland expressed that their staff and producer who are also women need training about new development in their field.

Although, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (NEDFi) and other relevant ministries and government departments conduct conference, seminars and workshops for capacity building of the traders from the region, most of the meetings are conducted in Guwahati, affecting the participation of several related stakeholders from the other states. These events are produced solely for stakeholders in Assam.

Women entrepreneurs often prefer to work in sectors, which have traditionally been women-centric and require low skills, such as handicrafts or textiles, feeling that they will have fewer capacity constraints. However, they face difficulties in finding skilled labour. The reason is that while most of the labour force is also women, many of these women labourers have other priorities, such as agriculture and their responsibilities in their household. They will proceed to this work only after all those responsibilities are complete.

Women are generally expected to put their family-related responsibilities first, unlike men. Even if they wish to, putting their business first or on an equal footing with family responsibilities is difficult. This may be because of the low pay received by them on average or it may be that there are social or other pressures for them to focus on household labour instead. Such issues create supply-side problems in the international market for women entrepreneurs who are unable to guarantee large shipments without prior notice, and who thus have problems scaling up their business.

Lack of Digital Literacy and the Use of Social Media

Most of the traders in India's northeast states do not use social media platforms such as Facebook/Instagram/YouTube to promote their products and some of them are not aware of the scope of digital platforms for business purposes.

Facebook and WhatsApp are the most common platforms used by entrepreneurs to promote their products

Some of them are trying to connect with business to business (B2B) networks like Indiamart but usage is still low.

This is both due to low digital literacy as well as poor digital connectivity in northeast India. The latter problem leads to e-commerce and well-known digital platforms limiting their expansion in these states. Even for selling goods from northeast India to other parts of the world, traders have to pay higher IT-related costs which lowers their profit margins and makes their business uncompetitive.

Facebook and WhatsApp are the most common platforms used by entrepreneurs to promote their products. With numerous e-commerce platforms coming in, one needs to check the authenticity of such platforms. There were cases of delay in payment as shared by a few entrepreneurs.

Problems in Making Connections

This is a common problem faced by almost all the women traders in all the northeast states. They do not have business partners or connections in external markets. They are not invited into various trade fairs and international seminars so that they can make new connections. For example, a successful clothing & textile producer in Assam wanted to export in other countries but despite having all the necessary documentation she was unable to do so because she does not have fixed connections outside India so that she can sell her products in external markets.

Recommendations

Focused Capacity Building

In this study, it became clear that women living in the northeast have entrepreneurial potential and zeal, but are often unable to build their own capacity. During the awareness workshops, the women participants largely noted in their feedback that regular and focused awareness workshops would be an excellent mechanism to help women entrepreneurs. They also noted that further transparency on how entrepreneurs are chosen for various promotional or training events would enable them to participate better. Many of these women are first-generation entrepreneurs and thus do not have mentorship.

Such programmes should be designed as per specific requirements such as (1) targeting a particular type of women for example, exporter/artisans; (2) occurring on a regular basis; (3) ensuring that all the states of northeast are covered; (4) it may be product specific for example, agro products/textiles; (5) targeting particular issues of difficulty

such as certification of products/standard packaging requirements or documentation requirements for financing; (6) targeting aspiring entrepreneurs and (7) providing information about financial support schemes.

Gender-Sensitivity Training for Bank and Customs Officials, and Other Key Institutions

According to our informants, women find it difficult to access finance, and may be asked to bring their male relatives, or may be refused loans or schemes. Particularly in the northeast, our informants have been told that there have been a lot of previous defaults, and this has increased the barriers for women. Having branches staffed by female officials would promote women's access to finance.

Along with this, sensitivity training for officials along with positive recruitment of women in key institutions for women entrepreneurs and traders such as DGFT, customs and border points will create a support system for women.

Women living in the northeast have entrepreneurial potential and zeal, but are often unable to build their own capacity

Small Border Stalls or Border Haats in Manipur

Manipur has an extensive international border, and a strong history of women's entrepreneurship. There is information that a great deal of informal trading happens along the borders. In Meghalaya and Tripura, which have internationally shared borders with Bangladesh, there have been efforts to take advantage via the setting-up of border haats. This could be replicated in Manipur, with the state government and Centre facilitating talks with the government of Myanmar.

The preference for informal trading by women and small traders is due to several grounds. It is well-known that a major reason is the complexity of procedures and the difficulty level and high cost for women who produce at a small level to identify and correctly pass all the procedures. Many traders may be willing to formalise and pay taxes to the government as they would also gain safety and infrastructure and other facilities in return. DGFT posts in states with international borders would facilitate traders to process all the procedures and would be a step forward in formalising and identifying traders.

Women tend to prefer businesses in a few sectors such food and food processing, garments, handlooms and textiles. Very few women expand into other businesses even where there is a profitable market for it.

Women traders in border haat at Balat, Meghalaya
(Photo credit: CUTS)



The Requirement for Banks which Deal with Foreign Exchange Services

It was also observed during fieldwork that **Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh** do not have banks branches, which deal with foreign exchange, which will make any sort of formal international trade difficult, and the process for gaining Letter of Credit (LoC) or pre-shipment finance on a regular basis virtually impossible. This has a greater effect on women rather than men, who typically find it easier to travel to other states if necessary for such business purposes, but it is still a strong barrier to conducting business.

National bank branches with forex and other international transfers related services in border cities or capital cities in each of these states would be a good step forward in smoothing institutional mechanisms.

Encouraging Women to Branch out into Non-Traditional Businesses

One of the repeated factors, which came out was that women tend to prefer businesses in a few sectors, such as food and food processing, garments, handlooms and textiles. Very few women expand into other businesses even where there is a

profitable market for it. Business and market planning training for aspiring entrepreneurs could be a preliminary step in the right direction but would have to be carefully planned in order to reach the correct audience, who would make appropriate use of it.

Diversifying Channels for Information Dissemination

It is clear from the table summarising some key points from our workshop questionnaire that many women feel the lack of information as a key point.

A wider reach and more effective access could be achieved in the training and awareness generation by involving local institutions like District Industrial Centres as well as Tribal Autonomous District Councils in the northeast, as well as bringing on board bodies like the Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Naga Business Association, North-East Women Entrepreneurs' Association and other such bodies, which are not connected to the government but have wide reach amongst women entrepreneurs.

Roundtable Meeting at Guwahati, Assam
(Photo credit: CUTS)



Action Agenda

Enhancing Women's Participation in Trade in the Northeast Action Agenda

Action	Way Forward	Challenges	People/Institutions to Bring on Board
Short-Term/Medium-Term			
Making government schemes work for northeastern states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Localisation of schemes for entrepreneurs, including lowering of entry barrier and focusing on real needs (such as the requirement of working capital and collateral-free loans for small/new entrepreneurs) • Cluster development, developing multiple clusters rather than only one or two well-known ones 	<p>Policy analysis has to be conducted in a deep dive to identify the bottlenecks and methods to improve grassroots uptake</p> <p>Identification of viable clusters for promotion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and State-level counterparts • Northeast Council • Ministry of Rural Development
Digital literacy training for entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module for entrepreneurs with a simple step-by-step procedure for important procedures online • Identification of important procedures that need to be available by mobile and low-speed internet and bringing this to the attention of respective departments 	Dissemination of modules to those who would most benefit from it may be a challenge	

Action	Way Forward	Challenges	People/Institutions to Bring on Board
Improving physical infrastructure for transport connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better roads, hinterland connectivity would reduce the cost and time of transportation thereby reducing the cost of production. This would enhance the participation in e-commerce as timely delivery of the product is very important in e-trade 		Central and state government Private sector
Financial and documentation training for entrepreneurs to encourage them to formalise.	<p>This would be ideally taken up by the government, who can take a two-step process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training women entrepreneurs on filling up relevant legal and financial documentation Identifying duplication or relatively less important documentation and reducing the burden 		
Engaging as a group with state and central governments for physical and digital infrastructure development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing groups such as the - North-East Women Entrepreneurs Association and the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FICCI-FLO) North-East groups should join under a single umbrella Identify single or very few infrastructure improvement projects with immediate tangible benefits and also bring on board relevant government departments for it For digital infrastructure improvement or projects such as courier access, partnering with corporates for mutual benefit is also plausible, if there is adequate profit from the project 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FICCI Ladies Organisation North-East Women Entrepreneurs Association Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry Assam Chamber of Commerce Arunachal Pradesh Chamber of Commerce and Industries Other state-level or Northeast specific entrepreneurs groups

Action	Way Forward	Challenges	People/Institutions to Bring on Board
Building on social capital and the close family and tribal connections to support business development	For instance, acquiring land for business or industrial purposes can be a major issue. Encouraging tribes or indigenous groups to support the business development of one of their own people is a way forward.	Such initiatives and the form they would take would have to come from the individual groups and tribes themselves for success.	
Identification of export-oriented products/services that can develop economies of scale or high-profit margins and empowering women entrepreneurs to enter new sectors of business	Some sectors such as sports are yet to be explored in the region. Many women are involved at a small scale in the tourism and service industry but unable to expand. Identification and encouragement of such sectors will benefit the women as well as the region		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academicians/ Research Institutes • Directorate-General of Foreign Trade
Value-chain study and development of indigenous products so that raw material is available in bulk and of acceptable quality	Particularly in agricultural, food-processing and textile sectors where women are heavily involved	Much of the work women are involved in is informal and difficult to trace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academicians, think tanks
Long-term			
Development of a government-produced or endorsed vision for sustainable tourism to optimise gains from	Entrepreneurs, particularly women entrepreneurs, who are already engaging in the tourism industry should develop best-practices for sustainability over the entire region. Best practices from countries like Bhutan can also be analysed and incorporated. These can be	The existing vision documents for tourism in the northeast states are underutilised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Tourism

Action	Way Forward	Challenges	People/Institutions to Bring on Board
international and national tourism while minimising harms of trade	presented to the respective state governments for their perusal		
Building relationships as the northeast region with other countries in the region with whom India has trade relations, to ensure better trade relations with the northeast states	The northeast states could develop and maintain relations with the countries and develop regional trade understandings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State governments • Chambers of Commerce and Industries in the respective states and countries

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About the Project

Throughout the world, the importance of economic empowerment and participation of women is being recognised as vital for sustainable development. The Northeast states of India, despite their natural potential have not yet reaped its full benefits in economic development. Considering the egalitarian status of women in the societies of these states, women have a pivotal role to play in the development of the region.

The study aims to elucidate the complexities of the issues faced by women traders in the northeast. Apart from the geographical limitations of the region, there are also numerous socio-economic barriers that create a bottleneck for women in scaling up and accessing regional and international markets. Policy recommendations and an action agenda have also been proposed to build up an enabling ecosystem for women traders.

CUTS International

Established in 1983, CUTS International (Consumer Unity & Trust Society) is a non-governmental organisation, engaged in consumer sovereignty in the framework of social justice and economic equality and environmental balance, within and across borders. More information about the organisation and its centres can be accessed here: <http://www.cuts-international.org>.



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