

Mainstreaming *Shepreneurs* in International Trade

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14:30-16:00 Hours (Indian Standard Time)

Moderator

Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International, Jaipur

Speakers

- **Anoush Der Boghossian**, Head of Trade and Gender, World Trade Organisation (WTO)
- **Jahnabi Phookan**, National President, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) Ladies Organization (FLO) and Director, Jungle Travels India
- **Mia Mikic**, Permanent Advisor, Asia Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade
- **Nandita Baruah**, Country Representative - India, The Asia Foundation

Background

Women entrepreneurs play a significant role in global trade and their contribution towards producing jobs, wealth, poverty reduction, human development, education, health and nation's development especially in developing countries has been realised.

Cumbersome procedures are involved in establishing, registering and running any business, formal and informal trade and other infrastructure-related challenges are some of the reasons due to which women entrepreneurs are hesitant in exporting their products.

It is acknowledged that women entrepreneurship is an important indicator for world development, however, the hurdles faced by women entrepreneurs ranging from inadequate access to information, technology and complexities in trade-related procedures, limit them from accessing opportunities to engage in economic activities.

One of the significant issues amongst various challenges in the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India Nepal (BBIN) sub-region is asymmetric information resulting in lack of awareness and barriers for women to do business including cross-border trade.

The project entitled ‘*Gender Dimensions of Trade Facilitation: Evidence from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal*’ is implemented by CUTS International in cooperation with its partners – Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bhutan Media and Communications Institute, and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment with support from the United Kingdom’s Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Given this background and context, CUTS organised this webinar entitled ‘Mainstreaming Shpreneurs in International Trade’ on Zoom platform along with a live feed on Youtube to launch two videos created by CUTS International in collaboration with Mercury Communication Design Pvt. Ltd. explaining the procedure for trade. The webinar was attended by around 100 participants from all over the world.

Key Discussion Points

Access to Information for Trade

Women entrepreneurs are underrepresented in international trade. As per the data available with the WTO, only 15 per cent of women are involved in export. However, there is 25 per cent women participation from India and 27 per cent from South Asia, Latin America and Africa respectively.

The transaction costs incurred in running any business is high due to compliance with regulations and the complicated trade-related procedures, having an adverse impact on the profit margins of a business. The better and right knowledge will help women entrepreneurs to dispose-off middle-men which will positively influence the profit margins of a business.

The WTO has gathered evidence on women entrepreneurs in East Africa, South Asia, and Latin America showing that despite the low level of knowledge on trade rules, women were eager to participate in the export sector. 92 per cent of women-led enterprises were interested in getting trade-related training.

Further, the WTO is coming up with a programme dedicated to women entrepreneurs in line with their needs to fill-in existing gaps in knowledge and training in trade rules and agreements. This WTO programme will be tailor-made and regionally anchored.

Most of the women entrepreneurs in the informal sector are not tech-savvy and since one-third of businesses of the world are women-owned, therefore, empowering women through inclusive policies and facilitating access to credit will have a direct impact on the business owned by them and subsequently on the economic development as well.

Integrate Gender Lens while Crafting Trade Policies

The changing global economy provides women with new opportunities through services, global value chains (GVCs) and digital technologies. Hence, it is imperative to integrate a gender lens while crafting trade policies.

Recently, a Memorandum of Understanding has been concluded with the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC) that provides free access to learning resources and digital skilling awareness drives through e-skills. More such initiatives should be undertaken to bridge the prevailing gender divide in digitalisation.

The gender differences in the laws should be focussed upon and discriminatory treatment towards women with respect to unequal wages, harassment faced by them at various levels in the trade and the society, etc. should be tackled on priority. There are already laws in place to counter such gender discrimination; however strict enforcement of these is required.

Gender-sensitive approach to trade is important. Gender balance in the decision-making process, equal participation and employment opportunities, access to resources and knowledge, direct interface with buyers/sellers by cutting out middlemen and increased participation in e-commerce avenues, will help bridge the gender divide in trade. Training women digitally is crucial.

The challenges will remain but opportunities have increased through massive scale-up of digital platforms for any economic activity including knowledge generation and trade. To increase the footprints of women entrepreneurs in the trading sector, one needs to first look at their role in the domestic economy. The development of digital data will help women entrepreneurs in availing credit, data literacy, etc.

A gender transformative policy is the need of the hour. Most of the decision-makers are still men and they look at the policies from their perspective. Therefore, more women-centric trade policies are needed.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) is working with various digital companies to help women entrepreneurs create a database of their transactions, which can be used as digital assets for applying for loans, among other benefits.

Major Recommendations

Bridging the digital divide in gender is important for the growth of women entrepreneurs along with trade and jobs. Adequate training and sensitisation of women entrepreneurs in trade procedures will motivate them to overcome the cross-border trade challenges in the BBIN sub-region and also globally.

The governments should invest in data collection to create more transparency in their trade policies and make them more impactful. The government should simplify the trade procedures to the best of their knowledge using digital technologies as much as possible.

There is a need for building the trade capacity of women entrepreneurs to integrate with the global market. There is room for action that needs to be concrete and grounded with the needs of women entrepreneurs and traders.

Various gaps such as infrastructure-related gaps to be resolved like improving access to electricity, water, roads and other connectivity related networks; knowledge related gaps such access to improved and new technology should be encouraged.

The focus should now be on the new age economy, for instance, the divide between rural and urban entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs at the regional, national and international levels should be bridged.

Comments on Video

The videos were made in collaboration with Mercury Communication Design Pvt. Ltd. to provide comprehensive information about establishing the business and procedures of exports to women entrepreneurs for conducting an awareness generation programme in India under the project entitled '*Gender Dimensions of Trade Facilitation: Evidence from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal*'. A similar exercise is under progress in other countries.

The videos were well appreciated and requested by various participating organisations for their perusal as well.

Conclusion

Knowledge is fundamental if the trade is to be used as a tool for economic empowerment. The governments have limitations in reaching out to a large number of micro, small and medium entrepreneurs; hence, there is the need for a large-scale, decentralised engagement of the private sector and the civil society and community-based organisations.

This will ensure women's role in business and trade can be enhanced and our post-COVID-19 economic recovery will be more balanced, resilient and sustainable.

Action Points

Bridging the divide with the gender lens with respect to digitalisation, knowledge and trade policy formulations is crucial to increase women's participation in trade. This calls for the private sector and civil society organisations to come forward for better implementation of government initiatives.

For easy accessibility, regional languages should be used in the digital government portals of the Ministry of Commerce & Industries.

Gender subsidy can be considered at borders – such as there is carbon tax at borders.

The WTO Secretariat should develop HS code data with gender-wise involvement for better analysis of women's engagement in GVCs and trade.