

October 30, 2020

1. Introduction:

CUTS International together with its partners: Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bhutan Media and Communications Institute and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment and with the support from the United Kingdom's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, is implementing a project titled 'Gender Dimensions of Trade Facilitation: Evidence from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN)'. Its objective is to favour gender inclusive trade policies so as to enhance the participation of women in trade related activities.

Under this project CUTS organised a webinar titled 'Gender Dimensions of Trade Facilitation in the BBIN Sub-region' on October 30, 2020 to deliberate the findings of the [briefing paper compendium](#) produced under this project. The webinar was attended by more than 50 participants from diverse background Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

Moderator

BipulChatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International, Jaipur

Key panellists

- **Anoush Der Boghossian**, Trade and Gender Focal Point, World Trade Organisation, Switzerland
- **Selima Ahmed**, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh and President, Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- **RubaRummana**, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Science, Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Dhaka
- **ManjuGiri**, National Consultant Gender & Social Development, Thimphu
- **Bina Pradhan**, Gender Expert & Social Economist, Sanepa, Kathmandu
- **Bibek Ray Choudhuri**, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, Kolkata

2. Background:

Over the past few years, particularly after the adoption of the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) by the World Trade Organization (WTO), an enhanced importance is being given to the gender dimensions of trade and trade policies. It has been widely argued that gender is a crucial instrument for development and equality in trade interventions across the world, in addition to fuelling growth in an economy.

In Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, inadequate involvement of women in business and entrepreneurship has been observed due to social expectations, traditional gender norms and constraints in accessing resources. Thus, there exists a need to create discourse focusing on gender dimensions in matters related to trade and development in the BBIN sub-region and further explore the concept through political, social and economic lenses. CUTS work reveals that the absence of gender responsive trade facilitation measures may exacerbate gender inequality.

This webinar aims at emphasising on potential benefits in terms of higher trade if gender responsive trade facilitation measures are implemented.

3. Key Discussion:

The focus on Gender Facilitation for trade facilitation will be lopsided if we limit ourselves to the existing trade agreements. What we need is to have is a broader approach. Unless we have a positive economic agenda for women for gender trade facilitation cannot be achieved.

3.1 WTO Study Findings

The focus point towards trade facilitation for women must include understanding of the situation of women entrepreneurs in the BBIN region, being innovative and responsive to support women in trade and the role of the WTO in trade facilitation regarding women.

In a study done by WTO in the BBIN Sub-region it was found that 70 percent of women entrepreneurs are mostly in manufacturing (handicraft), intention for future exports is high (with 1 caveat: COVID 19), trading difficulties in the BBIN region are high too. Other important challenge preventing women entrepreneurs from trading internationally are high trade facilitation costs. These Trade Facilitation costs and difficulties were exacerbated by the COVID19 crisis.

The primary requisite towards the aim for trade facilitation regarding women entrepreneurs is to acquire a good and detailed understanding of the concrete hurdles faced by women traders and concrete situations on the ground, categorising trade policy measures, categorising the types of female traders, identifying trade rules and provisions in the WTO TFA corresponding to the indicators. Training women in trade rules and improving their advocacy in the customs and border agencies.

Towards the aforementioned aim, WTO has established an informal Working Group on Trade and Gender on 23 September 2020 by 127 WTO Members and Observers

3.2 Challenges in BBIN-sub region

Gender specific constraints and importance of gender sensitivity still remain largely unexplored. Huge reforms are needed in the gender impact of services (customs & border management, logistic services, trade infrastructure & transportation and trade related policies). Little attempt has been made to identify and address the needs of women in trade.

Women in Bangladesh, both in informal and formal sector, face numerous challenges. It was additionally underlined by Selima Ahmed how the cumbersome trade procedures, customs and related fees fall heavily on women than men.

Equal distribution of socio-economic factors such as education, health is assumed to lead to equal women empowerment. However, empirically we can observe that implicit structural challenges lead to unequal gender empowerment. Women's exercise of agencies in structural subordination has not been included in indicators. Feminist perspective has been ignored. Thus, the panellists urged the need for a gender friendly and responsive environment.

This can be done by initiating policies for financial assistance, market related queries and gender sensitization initiatives to simplify and harmonize trade procedures for women.

The discussion highlighted that despite having achieved near gender parity in areas like education and health, women in Bhutan remain underrepresented, especially in the trade and entrepreneurship sector. The underlying reasons for the same include lack of access to knowledge, financial services and training sessions in addition to the traditional socio-economic norms that prevent women to engage in trade and entrepreneurship.

3.3 Suggestions

The key suggestions for addressing the above challenges in Bhutan covered five bases: (i) inclusion of gender specific components in various policies, (ii) inclusion of women in consultative process and initiate gender sensitization schemes at border offices, customs organizations and grievance redressal cells, (iii) implementing special export promotion schemes targeted at women; (iv) facilitating training sessions for women in local languages for finance management, trade procedures, formalities, documentation, etc. (v) digitalization (vi) financial assistance in the form of collateral free loans and schemes (vii) Additionally, efforts to facilitate affordable public transportation, provision of electricity on subsidised rates, updating infrastructure and adapting gender sensitive measures along with encouraging trade fairs and trips for women for developing business linkages.

With regard to Bangladesh, some of the measures that can be taken to facilitate trade for women entrepreneurs are: making formal trade through the land borders more facilitative and less cumbersome for women, strengthening and increase the presence of Border Haats at strategic points to normalize cross-border trade with India & Myanmar.

One silver lining of the global pandemic is the lesson for SMEs (Small & Medium Enterprises) that sustainability is the only option left. SMEs are the backbone of the economy of Bangladesh and women are largely engaged in SMEs. Trade facilitation improves economic status and empowers women's engagement in SMEs through poverty reduction & profitability. Bangladesh can especially use the provisions under the WTO's TFA.

In the context of Nepal, wherein most of the women traders are in the informal sector, collecting more data and information on the quantum and nature of informal trade and the extent of women's participation is crucial. Expanding the knowledge base on prevailing situations in the country will help policymakers in adopting more targeted measures and more harmonious involvement and coordination between institutions, NGOs and women traders in Nepal.

The issue of increasing gender inequality in India due to lack of trade facilitation was also discussed. The panel recognised the persistence of insensitivity towards women in every node of a value chain. To tackle the same, we need to take incremental steps by pivoting our mind-set. However, marginal steps can be taken by focussing on initiating discourse on how to make procedures and standards more equal than they are instead of completely eliminating the inequalities.

4. Conclusion

The panellists concluded that an implementation of the discussed reforms can be instrumental in increasing women participation and further help women pivot from informal to formal trade.

Bipul Chatterjee, in his concluding remarks, emphasised on returning to the basics and establishing a basic framework to engage more women in the sector. He mentioned that a starting point has been initiated and now we need to focus on a positive agenda for gender measures of trade facilitation while sensitizing male folk of the society and enlighten them about the positive aspects of women empowerment. It was also observed that CUTS work is in line with the WTOs work deliberated by Anoush.

Adding to the above, Anoush underlined that while a shift in mentality is imperative; a virtuous circle can be established by triggering the attitude shifts by initiating policy reforms.

5. Action Points

CUTS will explore synergy with WTO's work on gender dimensions for trade facilitation.

There could be an exchange of research material between CUTS and WTO for future studies which will eventually lead to more synergetic and holistic outcomes.