

No Such Thing as Gender-Neutral Trade Policy

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Abstract

Trade policy is not gender neutral. As a matter of fact, it cannot be. To counter the inherent disadvantages of social, institutional, and structural constructs, as well as access and capacity constraints specific to women, policy, including trade policy, needs to actively and continuously neutralize these disadvantages, and create an ecosystem where men and women are on the same playing field in economic activity, and therefore, in trade. It needs to be gender-balancing, at the very least. It needs to effectively address the inherent gender-specific limitations to access and capacity that women face in participating in trade. This requires better representation from women, effective stakeholder engagement, and continuous collaboration between the public and private sectors, and must leverage the strength, reach, and scale offered by digital technologies and platforms.

Keywords: Trade policy, gender neutral, women representation, gender balancing action

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1. Does Policy Discriminate?

There is no such thing as gender-neutral economic policy. Unless policy recognises the inherent limitations to participation of women in the economy, and actively addresses it to level the playing field, it will always be less favourable to women. Against this backdrop, in the discussion on mainstreaming gender in trade, there are four premises to be established at the outset.

One, women are nearly half the global population. Another 1% are third gender people. Collectively, that represents nearly half the possible economic contribution. In an ecosystem where nearly half the productive, employable demographic is limited by systemic restrictions to effective participation, policy that fails to actively address such restrictions undermines its own purpose. Not doing everything that can be done to ensure that everyone, irrespective of gender, can make that economic contribution effectively and optimally is naturally and evidently counter-intuitive.

Two, trade policy is a derivative or extension of domestic economic policy, and before all else, the ability of women to participate effectively in the workforce.

Three, economic policy, and therefore, trade policy is not gender neutral. Simply because nothing in economic policy de jure discriminates between men and women does not imply that all genders are, in fact, placed equally in economic activity. Until such point that the inherent disadvantages that women face in their effective participation in economic activity are accounted for in economic policy, it will continue to de facto prevent them from being placed at the same footing as men, in the workforce. It is also pertinent to underscore that these disadvantages do not necessarily stem from policy. However, identifying and addressing them is a matter of policy.

Four, women participate in economic activities in various capacities – as producers, sellers, suppliers across the value chain and across the lifecycle of transactions, and as consumers. And in each capacity, the challenges they face in participating in economic activity are diverse: social or societal, physiological, access, capacity, opportunity, consistency and longevity, security, etc. It is when economic activity allows opportunity and capacity to transcend and nullify this myriad of challenges that ‘gender in trade’ becomes a more substantive conversation.

When national policies ensure that women are participating effectively in economic activity, then trade policy can start looking at the barriers to trade that either only impact women, or those that have a greater impact on the ability of women to engage in cross-border trade. Trade policy, both national and plurilateral/multilateral, can then aid gender inclusivity in trade through four key routes:

- By ensuring space for domestic policy to accommodate specific sensitivities associated with gender parity, including through the promotion of what is known as ‘women-intensive sectors’ in economic activity;
- Through leveraging trade agreements and economic cooperation to promote trade in women-oriented or women-intensive sectors;
- Through cooperation and dialogue, data collection and analysis, and exchange of best practices; and

- Through harnessing developments that could transcend or neutralize these challenges, such as measures for trade facilitation, or the increasing link between trade and technology, and working to ensure that women across the globe can leverage these developments to participate better in trade.

This brief assumes that domestic economic policy will continue to work to address the issue of effective participation of women in the workplace, and therefore, commences its analysis at the point of passing the baton to trade policy, focussing on the latter three routes.

2. Why are Women not Optimizing Participation in Economic Activity?

That improving the participation of women in trade is a desirable objective is a given. Even then, despite centuries of trade policy, economic cooperation, national reforms, and international conventions and action, progress on eliminating all limitations to participation of women in trade is limited, across geographies, cultures, and levels of economic development, and some challenges are persistent and cross-cutting.

These limitations are largely twofold – access and capacity – and are, by definition, gender-based and gender-differentiated. At the risk of broad generalization, they include, inter alia:

- Social and institutional constructs of generational conditioning positioning women as the fulcrum of domestic establishment – childbearing and raising of children, household care, management of family matters, etc.;
- Persistent and increasingly troubling concerns regarding the safety and security of women, both at and outside the workplace, which render several activities unsustainable for women;
- Social and workplace bias that places aspersions on the management abilities, consistency, and longevity of women in the workplace;
- Barriers to education, skilling, and capacity building for women resulting, from social mindsets and circumstances;
- Legal and institutional constraints and structures; and
- Limited access to finance, technology, and logistics.

Even as international cooperation calls for greater gender equality and empowerment of women and young girls, through eliminating all kinds of discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against women, and their increased participation in decision making and economic and political work, as well as in valuing unpaid domestic work (UN SDG), it is not hard to see how all these goals are the subject matter of domestic policy and reform – social, economic, institutional, and structural.

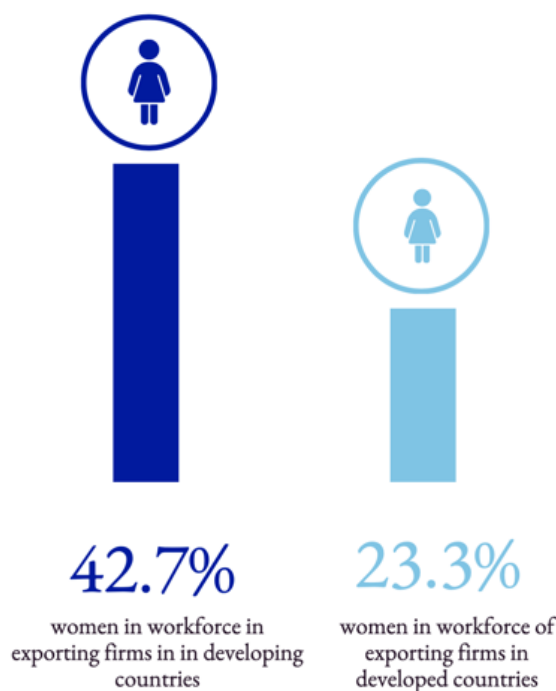
Where governments attempt to address these gaps, both to access and capacity, through domestic initiatives, international cooperation has the ability to support and facilitate these, as well as to foster dialogue and exchange of best practices to strengthen these efforts and enhance their outcome. The

focus then turns to participation of women in trade, and the role of trade policy in facilitating and optimising this participation.

3. Women in Trade: Roles and Challenges

Women participate in trade as both, producers or suppliers of goods and services, and as consumers. As producers and suppliers in trade, women participate directly, as business owners, producers and suppliers (exporters) of goods and services, as well as indirectly, in value/supply chains, adding value to the final exported output, in large and small enterprises and start-ups, in formal and informal economic activity.

This includes businesses with digital component(s) in the supply chain, as well as those where supply chains and delivery are entirely physical. It covers sectors and geographies where paperwork and administrative measures have been digitised, and simplified or streamlined, and those where it is has not. They are also employed in customs agencies and at border posts.



It would be a fair assessment to say that trade has the potential to help better position women in economics and society, and that women contribute productively to trade, in various capacities. Estimates suggest that that more exporting firms hire more women (33% of the workforce in developing countries and 39% in developed countries) than non-exporting firms (24% of the workforce on average), and that firms with foreign investors, or those positioned in global value chains on average hire 11-12% more women than other firms (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023). Women working in export-oriented firms have a higher probability of being in formal employment, with higher wages and more job security.

Global value chains (GVCs) have increased employment and income opportunities for women, especially by enabling the integration of MSMEs to global markets. It has been estimated that women working at various points of GVCs are 10% more likely to be part of the formal workforce (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023). Analysts also suggest a positive link between the participation of women in economic activities and export diversification (Laperle-Forget and Gürbüz Cuneo, 2024). The symbiotic nature implies that addressing barriers to women's participation in trade is just smart economics.

It is also important to reiterate that 'women in trade' are a diverse group, spread across geography, level of economic development, sector, capacity and skills, access to resources, finance and technology, age, social and societal considerations, with an equally diverse spread of barriers to effective participation. While opportunities and roles for participation of women in trade have expanded with the facilitation of cross-border trade through digital platforms and technologies, their effective participation – and the roles, skill and wage levels at which they are able to participate – is limited by access and capacity in varying degrees.

3.0.1 Women in Business

Traditionally, the services sector employs more women than agriculture or manufacturing sectors. ILO estimates that 58% of all service sector jobs employed women in 2020 (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023). This estimate represents an average across developed and developing countries (World Bank Group, 2020). Therefore, as trends indicate a faster growth in trade in services than in trade in goods, with the sector generating more employment, and earlier in the development process, it is safe to say that opportunities for women in trade are expanding (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023).



This has been aided by the growing interlinkages between trade and technology, with digital connectivity and tools making it easier, faster, and more efficient to trade across borders, especially in services sectors. Digital technologies have also neutralized the need for mobility, and brought more agility to the process of service delivery, further aiding the ability of women to participate effectively in trade, transcending traditional impediments to this ability. Digital platforms and the 'gig economy' have also aided the integration of women-owned businesses and women entrepreneurs in global trade, enabling access to international markets at the click of a button, and with limited need for physical mobility.

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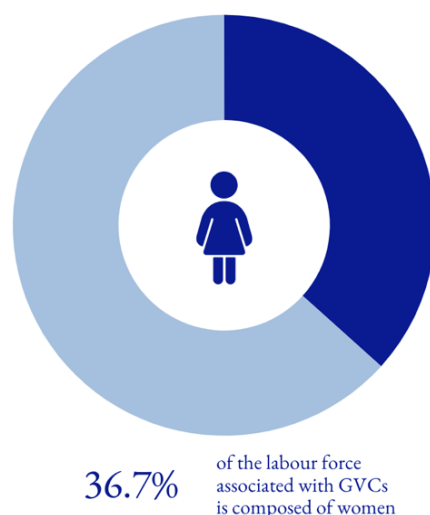
This has also led to an increase in entrepreneurial activities by women, and to women-owned businesses across countries. 40% of new businesses set up in the United States in 2019 were owned by women (WEF, 2022). In India, women own 20.5% of MSMEs (Times of India, 2024). However, this only reveals one side of the story. The statistics differ across countries. Even as one in six women have expressed a desire to start their own enterprise (GEM 2023), estimates reveal that in most countries, women owned businesses are small, and the number of women entrepreneurs decreases proportionately with size of the enterprise. Women are more probable than men to be ‘solopreneurs’ (GEM 2023). In the United States, the ratio of male- to female-owned businesses is still 3-1 (WEF, 2022). Reports also suggest that more women start their own enterprise out of “necessity” than men, and fewer to “pursue an opportunity” (Lesonsky, 2024)

Women in business face a few common barriers to establishing, scaling up and optimizing businesses, and engaging in cross-border trade. Of these, limited access to resources (including finance, logistics and networks) compared to their male counterparts, societal preconceived notions or biases, balancing with household responsibilities (which limits their mobility, consistency and longevity in business) (Laperle-Forget and Gürbüz Cuneo, 2024), and unequal access to skills and training, tend to have the greatest impact. The element of gender in these limitations is undeniable.

3.0.2 Sectors with Higher Participation from Women- Global Value Chains

Women find productive employment across various points of GVCs. While GVCs themselves are estimated to account for close to half of global trade (Barrientos and Pallangyo, 2020), similar estimates suggest that nearly 36.7% of the labour force associated with GVCs is composed of women (World Bank and WTO, 2020). The majority of this employment of women is in what are popularly known as women-oriented or women-intensive sectors – apparel and textile, agriculture and food processing, and transport and tourism. As a matter of fact, women make up 60-80% of the workforce associated with apparel and textile workforce (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

It is also worth noting that even in these sectors, men tend to be positioned in better paid, high-skill managerial roles (Barrientos and Pallangyo, 2020) with higher value-added in production, while women are employed largely in labour-intensive, low-skill, low-wage activities (Laperle-Forget and Gürbüz Cuneo, 2024). As a matter of fact, studies suggest that the low wage of women workers is one of the key factors ensuring competitiveness of manufacturing exports in developing economies (UNCTAD, 2022a). In lower value-added supply chains, women find employment largely in informal, home-based roles (Barrientos and Pallangyo, 2020).



It has also been observed that limiting women’s participation in labour-intensive, low value-added sectors can lower the bargaining power of women in the workplace against their employers, and can therefore exacerbate gender discrimination on wages and working conditions (UNCTAD *SDG Pulse*).

3.1 Access Constraints

3.1.1 Tariffs and Non-Tariff Barriers

Sectors that employ women in larger numbers, especially in developing countries, such as agriculture, food and beverages, textiles and apparel – appear to be placed in higher tariff brackets in most countries (OECD, 2021a). This is not to say that the tariffs themselves are discriminatory, but that these sectors, both on output and input, tend to be more protected by means of tariffs. This “pink tariff” implies that women have to pay more to procure inputs, and tend to be subject to more export restrictions (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023).

Non-tariff measures (also known as behind-the-border measures), including technical specifications, regulatory standards, and qualification and certification requirements, which add a fixed cost to trade, also tend to impact sectors and businesses with participation from women more significantly. This is not because these are imposed in a manner so as to disadvantage women. However, the impact of such measures, on women in trade is greater or unequal. One, because of the nature of sectors that employ women. Two, because of the size of enterprises typically owned by women.

Typically, and on average, women-owned businesses fall in the small- and medium-sized enterprise category. MSMEs tend to have smaller teams, and lesser manpower to assess and manage behind the border measures and customs procedures. In addition, since exports from these enterprises tend to be less frequent, and in smaller consignment sizes than for larger businesses, this adds repetitive burden on the business (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023). Since trade finance is harder to access for women-owned businesses, they are unable to absorb the impact of cost of complexity of procedures, which exacerbates the issue.


Sectors that are women-oriented also tend to be more impacted by behind-the-border measures. One such sector is services. The limitations to trade in services tend to be inherently behind-the-border in nature, adding cost and complexity to participation in trade. This sector employs the highest number of women across the globe, including in high-skill, high income roles (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

As a matter of fact, the increasing link between trade and technology, and the digitisation of delivery of key services, such as education and health, which offer gainful opportunities of employment for women with less discrimination (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023), including in high-skill and managerial roles, has also opened up possibilities for integration of women in global trade. The advent of the gig economy has also greatly benefited women in trade, as business owners and freelance service providers, as well as through participation in service provision in various types of enterprises.

In this landscape, the increasingly complex web of non-tariff barriers linked to trade in services, the ramen bowl of regulations governing cross-border trade in services (Mode 1) via the digital route, is placing layers of restrictions on trade in services, including digitally. Limited enforcement on accountability of digital services providers additionally complicates this, limiting trust in the ecosystem, and therefore participation of at-risk groups, including women. This has deeper and disproportionate impact on the ability of women to participate in trade, and to optimise the benefits of this participation.

3.1.2 Access to Finance

It has been estimated that 33% of small businesses in emerging markets are women-owned. Yet only 10% of these women entrepreneurs have access to trade finance, or can access critical financial services to support growth of their business (Women in Trade, International Finance Corporation (IFC)). As a matter of fact, nearly 780 million women are reported to lack access to ‘formal financial services’ (WEF, 2024). Women-led or women-owned businesses are about 30% more likely to need a guarantor, and are less like to receive credit financing. Reports suggest that only 18% of women who apply for trade finance receive necessary approvals (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

30% 
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In Vietnam, for example, a survey of 27 banks revealed that only 5 banks were catering to the specific needs of women-owned businesses, and only a small percentage of those banks by formal entities. Of surveyed entities, 14% noted that they were “financially unserved” despite seeking bank finance (Bialus, Thu Hien, and Hong Minh 2022). Similarly, estimates from India show that nearly 90% of women entrepreneurs in India are left to depend on self-financing, even as non-performing

loans are significantly lower (30-50%) in women-owned businesses (IFC, 2022). This is exacerbated by the fact that only 17% of employees in scheduled commercial banks in India are women, limiting the understanding of issues faced by women in accessing finance, and impacting the outlook towards such requests (SME Finance Forum).



These experiences reverberate for women entrepreneurs across countries. In the US, even as women owned businesses constitute 39% of all business in the country, and generate over USD 2.7 trillion in revenues, only 1.9% of venture capital funding is directed towards women-owned businesses (Allard, 2024). In fact, financial sector studies have indicated that men are 60% more likely to receive funding. Globally, the MSME finance gap for women is estimated at USD 1.7 trillion (WEF, 2023), with 70% of women in business, globally, indicating insufficient access to finance to enable growth of their businesses (Women's World Banking (nd)).

Women face more challenges in accessing finance for business, owing to factors such as social biases, requirements of scale of business, collateral requirements, limited knowledge of trade finance instruments (IFC, 2024), as well as administrative requirements and limited access to or familiarity with technological financial tools.

USD 1.7 trillion

people worldwide are estimated to be affected by substance use disorders

The limitations on access to finance impact women-owned businesses in their ability to invest in necessary resources – both physical and human, including in skill development, training, and capacity building.

3.1.3 Access to Technology

The link between trade and technology, the digitisation of trade, and its ability to transcend mobility-related barriers to trade, offers women immense opportunity to engage in cross-border trade,

including as service providers and participants in trade through digital platforms, and as hubs and spokes in the gig economy.

Economic activity on the digital medium provides women the flexibility of time, place of work (including the option to work from home), as well as direct access to clients and consumers across the globe with this flexibility. Digital platforms have the financial and logistics networks to aid women in their integration into trade. It has been suggested that digital platforms offer an opportunity to reduce the divide in access to jobs, resources, and markets for women, who are 26% less likely to be part of the workforce, and three times less likely than men to be business owners (IFC, 2020).

However, leveraging the benefits of technology in trade requires access, capacity, and security. Technology is less accessible to women than it is to men. UN Women estimates that the gap in access to technology has actually increased over the last few years. Global averages indicate that, relative to 69 % of men, only 63% of women tend to have access to technology, and that women are 12% less likely than men to own a mobile phone.

In least developed countries, this figure is more staggering, where men are 52% more likely to be connected to the internet (UN Women, 2023). In low-income countries, an average of 8% of women use mobile phones or access the internet to create an account (purpose undefined). This number is 28 % for upper middle-income countries, and only 49% for high income countries. Only 40% of women in upper middle-income countries and 53% of women in high income countries have used the internet to make payments in the last few years (Gender Data Portal, World Bank Group). Limited access to technology also prevents women from gaining familiarity with the medium, gadgets, and related digital tools.



Where they have access, women often lack the capacity to leverage the medium fully. Education and skill development in tech-related sectors is largely male dominated. Even in advanced countries like Singapore and Sweden, only 32 and 30% of the ICT graduates and 34 and 35% of STEM graduates, respectively, are women. In Cambodia, these numbers are 8 and 17%, respectively (Gender Data Portal, World Bank Group). UNICEF estimates that women are 35% less likely than men to have digital skills (UNICEF, 2023).

Limited access to technology also prevents women from accessing education and skill development, and vocational training programmes, digitally (Kikore, 2023). This means that women are less likely to know how to best leverage digital tools for trade. UNESCO estimates that women are

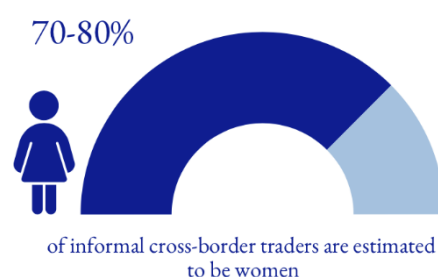
25% less likely to know how to leverage technology, and 13 times less likely than men to file for a patent in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) (UNESCO Women's Access to and Participation in Technological Developments).

Women are also more prone to harassment and tech-based crimes. The deficit in accountability of digital services providers, coupled with the absence of simple, accessible, cross-jurisdictional dispute settlement mechanisms for digitally enabled provision of goods and services, further limits the trust and ability of women in their participation in digital trade. This is why women often remain underrepresented in the development of technological tools (6% of professional software developers are women, and only 12% of researchers in artificial intelligence are women) (UNESCO Women's Access to and Participation in Technological Developments), as well as their use and regulation (UN Women, 2023).

The limited participation of women in digital trade further limits their ability to contribute to development and regulation of technology, leading to further development increasingly biased against women, or at the very least, not gender neutral.

3.1.4 Customs and Border Posts

Participation of women in trade is also limited by lengthy, unduly complicated, and cost-intensive customs and border processes. The time and cost implications impact women more severely than they do their male counterparts. Since 70-80% of informal cross-border traders are estimated to be women (Moyo Mudzingwa, 2022), the impact of such delays and costs on their effective participation in trade is not hard to appreciate.



This is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of customs and border post officials on land and sea trade routes across the globe tend to be men. Only 37% of the customs and border workforce is reported to be women (Hong, Bond, et al, 2022). This opens women in trade up to exploitation, (physical) harassment (Rocha and Piermartini, 2023) and the threat of violence, and creates a feeling of lack of security or safety. In the DRC, for example, an UNCTAD survey reports that 38% of women traders have reported abuse at customs borders. Similar stories have emerged from Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and other Central and Southern African economies (UNCTAD, 2022). In Brazil, as well, surveys on customs procedures by the World Bank have indicated that 13% of women reported abuse and harassment at border posts, relative to only 3% of men (World Bank, 2021). It is not hard to understand how this might act as a deterrent to women in trade.

3.1.5 Social Factors and Opportunity

Opportunities for women in trade are also limited by pre-conceived notions and biases against the abilities and professional aptitude of women, and discrimination in opportunity, and in compensation. Safety of women at the workplace, including from workplace harassment, is also a challenge that discourages women from entering the workforce. Gender-differentiation in hiring is exacerbated by such concerns related to the safety and security of women, at and outside the workplace, impacting access to opportunity.

3.2 Capacity Constraints

3.2.1 Household Responsibilities

Women have the primary responsibility of bearing and raising children, and of addressing the needs of the household. Women are often in a position of needing to choose between these responsibilities, and their professional opportunities. The time and effort required in fulfilling these responsibilities limits the consistency and longevity of women in economic activity, including trade. The unpaid commitments in the household also constrain the ability of women to accommodate flexibility in work hours (OECD, 2021b). This means that fewer women-owned businesses plug into supply chains and value chains (World Bank and WTO, 2020), and even those that do, do so with impact from these limitations to capacity.

3.2.2 Skills and Education

Relatively limited access and opportunity for skill development and upskilling, education and vocational training of women tends to inhibit their participation in trade to low skill, low-wage, non-managerial roles, and their ownership of businesses to smaller enterprises. It also limits their ability to leverage technology to participate in trade.

There are several reasons for such limitations on skill development, including their responsibilities at home, social biases and discrimination, the biological clock, and its implications for education and limited access to resources. This includes limited access to technology, which – in addition to limiting their ability to participate in trade, using technology, also prevents women from developing the necessary familiarity, comfort, and skills necessary to use technology to participate in trade. It also constrains their access to other skilling, educational, and training materials, relevant to their preferred line of work, available via digital media.

Limited skills also mean that women are employed lower on the value chain, and in certain specific, more traditional sectors, such as agriculture, food processing, and textiles and apparel. Other trading sectors, including services sectors such as education and healthcare, as well as tourism (sectors where women find gainful employment), often require a high skill level, and higher level of education, as well as vocational training for a specific skill set. The lack of sufficient and relevant skills also extends to the digital space, where – owing to the extant, gender-differentiated digital divide – women tend

to have limited skills and training to leverage digital platforms, and digital technologies, effectively, to participate in trade.

As developing and emerging economies seek to restructure their trade baskets, moving from primary sectors to higher-skilled manufacturing and services sectors, digitisation and automation of processes changes how countries trade, it becomes increasingly more critical to ensure that women have the necessary skills and training to participate in economic activities in these sectors. This is true even within traditional sectors, such as agriculture and textiles.

In parallel, insufficiency of capacity-building initiatives targeted to women on digital literacy, digital skilling for women in trade, and financial literacy and skills for women in trade, prevents them from leveraging available tools to upskill, up-finance, and upgrade their participation in trade.

This is exacerbated by the fact that women are often underrepresented in decision making in businesses as well as in policy. Therefore, there is limited understanding of the gender-differentiated challenges and impact of various policy decisions. This may be one of the reasons why there are little to no programs that provide targeted skill development for women traders on accessing, analysing, interpreting, and applying trade related information to their everyday trading activities (including tariff schedules and certification requirements), and compliance with standards and regulation, as well as opportunities offered by value chains and how they can be harnessed – skills and information that are necessary to engage effectively in trade.

3.3 Identifying the Problem Statement

3.3.1 Data and Analytics

If trade policy is to level the playing field and plug gender-differentiated participation in trade, there is first a need to correctly identify the problem statement. Such identification of the problem statement, of representation of women in trade, requires that the contours, structure, and details of this representation be clearly identified and quantified. This requires gender-disaggregated data and information related to cross-border trade, across sectors and geographies, including at the level of value-added output and services embedded.

Availability of such data will allow policy makers to fully appreciate the extent, nature, and effectiveness of participation of women in trade, including the spread of sectors, levels of development, and geographies; skills taught and those needed in specific sectors at the workplace; and the points at which women are facing obstacles to such participation. It will also provide an estimate of the distribution of gains from trade.

Such gender-disaggregated data is not being collected or compiled, and is therefore, not available for analysis. In fact, official statistics linking trade with gender are hard to come by (UNCTAD, 2020). This is true across developed and developing economies. Very few countries compile gender-disaggregated data, and most are limited to ad-hoc compilation. During COVID-19, for example, while it was clear that the crisis and associated restrictions to cross-border trade had a higher impact

on women, both in business as well as in the workforce, the absence of gender-disaggregated data made it harder for governments to identify, and therefore offer assistance to impacted women.

It is also concerning that women are generally underrepresented in data. Across academia, research, policy, technology, urban planning, media, and economic activity, data tends to be biased towards men, because men are substantially better represented (and in some cases, women are not represented at all) in the data that is being used for such analyses. This is true across sectors, including education, health, financial services, technology, skill development, product and service development, and customer services, for example. The underrepresentation of women in the data means that the analyses have an inherent bias (Criado Perez, 2019), and do not accurately reflect the challenges, requirements, and opportunities of women.

Indices compiled by various international organisations such as UNDP, UN WOMEN, and World Economic Forum, for example, focus on specific aspects of the participation of women in economic activity, and often omit the link with international trade (UNCTAD SDG Pulse). The World Bank conducts surveys to support national efforts, but is limited by the high costs of such surveys and their subsequent analyses.

In 2018, UNCTAD piloted its ‘Conceptual Framework for the Measurement of Gender Equality in Trade’ in six countries. In 2024, UNCTAD released a gender-based trade dataset under the ‘UNCTAD in Action: Gender and Trade’ initiative” (UNCTAD SDG Pulse). This provides some hope for a way forward in collecting and compiling statistics linking trade with gender, but substantially more work needs to be done, and close cooperation between the private sector, international organisations, and national governments will be necessary.

3.3.2 Representation

Women are underrepresented in trade, in economic activity, in value chains. This prevents women from realising their full economic potential, and prevents economic growth across economies from benefitting from effective participation of nearly half their workforce.

In parallel, women are also underrepresented in decision-making – in management positions in corporate structures, in policy making across governments and in the leadership roles in international organisations and regional development initiatives. This means that decision making fails to accurately account for requirements, opportunities, circumstances, skills, information, and challenges specific to women.

One is impacted by, and exacerbates the other.

Such underrepresentation also makes it harder to accurately identify the problem statement- the actual representation of women in trade by sector, geography, placement in value chains and supply chains, income, opportunity and conditions of participation, gender-differentiated challenges and requirements, and therefore, measures required to close the gap.

4. Levelling the Playing Field: Towards Gender-Balancing Action

Making trade policy effectively gender-balancing requires policy to transcend and neutralise gender-differentiated participation in trade by actively levelling the playing field. This necessitates action on both, domestic reforms (including on trade policy) at the national level, as well as through international cooperation, to create the necessary facilitative ecosystem.

Women participate on the supply side of trade, as business owners and as part of production cycles and value chains. In both, ensuring their ability to participate in economic activity, effectively, safely, and with a level playing field in the first step. This is a matter of domestic policy and reform – social, institutional, structural, and regulatory.

The contours of economic growth and cross-border trade are evolving. In some economies, this means a move away from primary activities to manufacturing and services, in some others, the nature of manufacturing is evolving from lower to higher value-added, and from assembly to component manufacturing. In several economies, there is an increasing role of technology-intensive activities and automation. In most economies, digital technologies are revolutionising how trade is conducted, and the processes associated with trade.

Participation of women in economic activity also needs to evolve in sync. This requires agile policy developments, actively levelling the playing field for women in the workforce, and working with women to help build capacity and skills, to prepare them for the evolving economic landscape. It also requires an appreciation of the fact that ‘women in trade’ is a diverse group, identifying the various components of this diversity, understanding the impact of barriers to trade on each component, and finding solutions that are inclusive and address issues across this diversity.

It is important to reiterate that trade policy, *per se*, cannot address all the layered challenges that women face in their effective participation in trade. Realistically, participation of women in trade first requires appropriate structural and institutional reforms at the national level to encourage their participation in the workplace. The role of trade policy and international cooperation is to foster an enabling environment that is more conducive to gender-inclusive trade through targeting women-intensive sectors, cross-jurisdictional institutional reforms, trade facilitation, and capacity building, in a manner that offsets some of the limitations that women face in trade. Such efforts will focus on access, capacity, representation, and collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data.

Domestic measures to increase participation of women in economic activities, including in trade, would include, *inter alia*;

- Effective, enforceable measures for safety and security of women, at home, at the workplace, and at all points between the two;
- Developing better informed employment policies, and workplace frameworks, including childcare provisions;
- Active elimination of workplace harassment and gender-based discrimination;

- Ensuring access to digital technologies for women, bridging the geographical and gender-based digital-divide;
- Skilling and upskilling women in the use of digital technologies to participate in trade;
- Creating effective opportunity and access for education and skilling of women, in particular to address skills required at the workplace (addressing the gap between education and employable skills); and
- Ensuring effective access to finance for women, including for women in business.

It is also necessary to bring trade closer to women in small towns and rural communities. This requires investing in women-oriented sectors in trade in a manner that creates jobs for women in value chains, for example, closer to their homes; promotion of local handicrafts and traditional methods of production; and skilling women workers in their ability to meet standards and technical regulations in the production of such goods. Linking these chains to the tourism sector can also help promote the participation of women in trade.

5. Making Trade Gender-Balanced: The Role for Trade Policy and Cooperation

Trade policy does not need to be gender-neutral. It needs to be gender-balancing.

There is an urgent need to rethink trade policy to create an ecosystem of frameworks, initiatives, and guidelines that map the diversity of ‘women in trade,’ identify the common and specific challenges each group faces in participating in trade, and then actively work to address these, to bring women on the same effective playing field as men in trade. This requires deeper cooperation across stakeholders, with inclusive representation of women in the process, to identify opportunities and address these gaps; and better data analytics, with gender-disaggregated inputs and outcomes, to plug gaps to market access where women face unequal limitations, and to build capacity among the diverse groups of women in trade to then leverage these opportunities.

Trade policy should aim to address representation of women in trade through:

- Effective market access for women-intensive sectors, linking women to GVCs;
- Trade facilitation and improving conditions at customs and border posts;
- Access to finance;
- Access to technology;
- Capacity building, skilling and education of women, and access to relevant information and knowledge;
- Ensuring effective representation of women in decision making and effective stakeholder engagement; and

- Improving analytics of participation of women in trade through better collection, mining, and analysis of gender-disaggregated trade data, to collectively create a safe, flexible, enabling ecosystem for women in trade.

To this end, international cooperation can work to leverage trade agreements to address gender-differentiated participation in trade, by reducing barriers to trade in sectors which matter most to women, in increasing the predictability and transparency of trade regulation, in improving border conditions for women in trade in goods, in the harmonization of regulation and the interoperability of digital systems to cut through red tape, in the development of local artisanship and rural traditional production processes through the development of border markets, collection, and analysis of gender disaggregated data, and on rethinking regulation of Mode 1 and Mode 4 of trade in services.

International cooperation can also facilitate capacity building for women in trade, and better use of digital platforms to connect women in cross-border economic cooperation.

5.1 Addressing Access Constraints

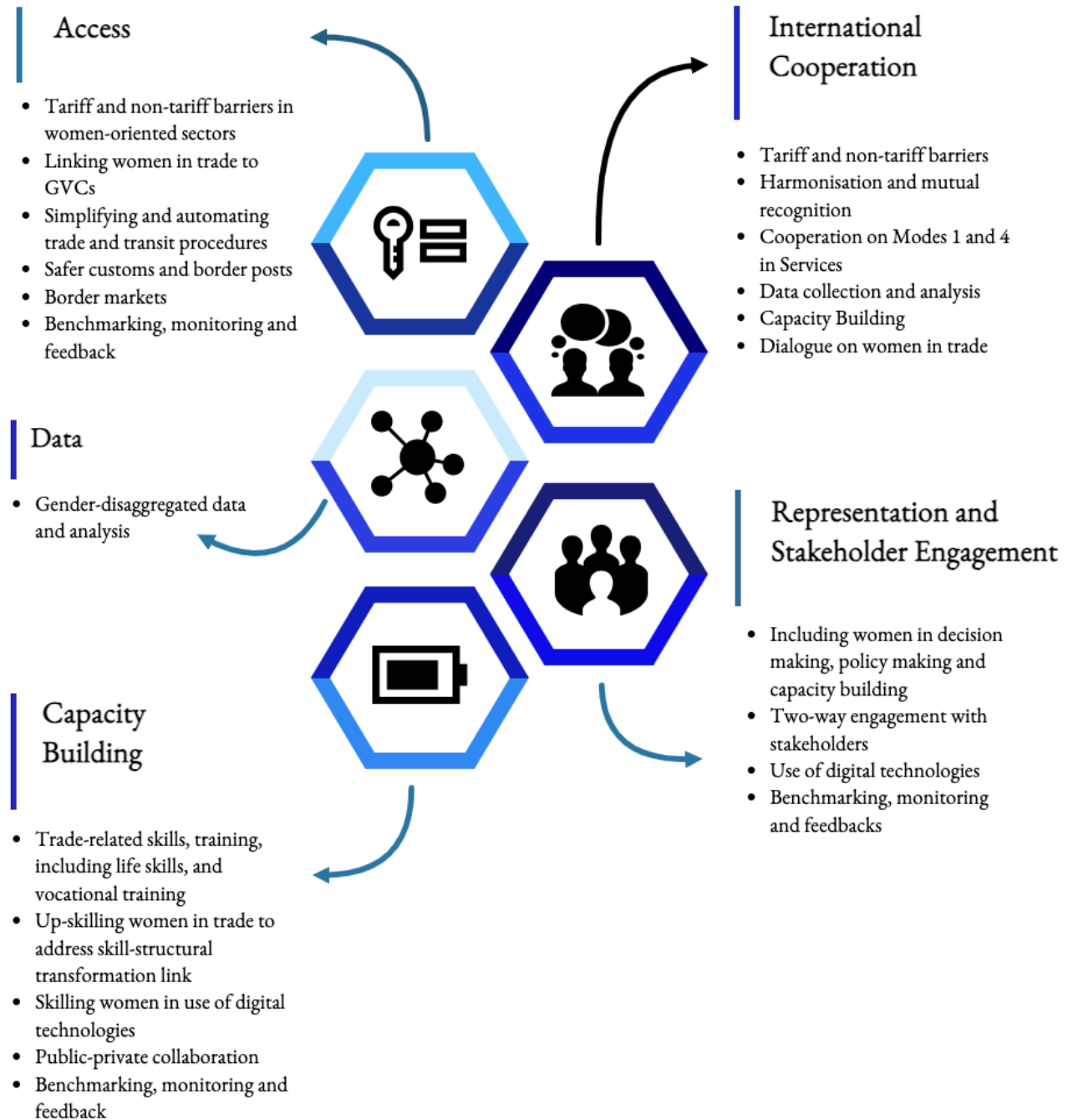
5.1.1 Market Access of Women-Intensive Sectors

Tilting trade policy to specifically promote sectors with greater participation of women is necessary to improve representation of women in trade. This includes structured trade policy to develop, promote, strengthen, and diversify such sectors, and reduce barriers to trade in sectors such as agriculture, food processing, textiles and apparel, and services sectors, as well as sectors where need for mobility is offset by digitisation of trade, where women have a higher probability of engaging in high-skill, high income roles.

This includes reducing behind-the-border / non-tariff barriers to trade, and encouraging harmonisation of standards and regulations and mutual recognition of certification and qualifications. Discussions on prioritizing and facilitating movement of women actors in trade across borders, under Mode 4 (Presence of Natural Persons) of supply of services will also benefit the participation of women in trade in services. The increased transparency and predictability of trade regulation also benefits women.

Economic cooperation agreements/trade agreements can serve as instruments to facilitate effective market access in women-oriented sectors, by addressing the gender dimension of trade between countries (OECD, 2021b), and by providing for preferential trading conditions in products and services produced, supplied, and consumed more significantly by women.

Agreements can be leveraged to encourage trade facilitation, and reduction of behind the border barriers to trade. They can also, with reference to commitments in their various chapters, provide for policy space among trade partners for measures appropriate for balancing the gender divide in trade and trade-related activities. In addition, such agreements can create frameworks to encourage compliance with international norms, in particular those that address circumstances pertaining to women (World Bank and WTO, 2020).



Developing digital trade regulation that is built on trust and accountability, and backed with simplified and robust dispute settlement mechanisms for digital trade, including the accountability of digital platforms and employers in the gig economy, is also critical to increasing trust and accountability in the system, and encouraging participation of women in digitally-enabled trade. Harmonization and interoperability of digital trade regulation, to reduce the cost and complexity for women traders and business owners on the digital domain is also an essential step to facilitating trade using technology.

To this end, international cooperation can help provide ease of trade and transit in Mode 1 (cross-border provision of services) of trade in services. For such efforts to have impact, it will be necessary

to establish, through trade agreements, mechanisms to monitor and review progress in this context, periodically.

Trade cooperation among partners can also actively promote local production methods and artisanal goods, through the now popular concept of ‘border markets’ which support the participation of women from local communities in trade. Examples of such border markets or ‘haats’ can be found along the border between Indian and Bangladesh (Kalaichar, Balat, Srinagar and Kamalasagar) where such markets promote the products and services of women suppliers, in particular from rural communities, through physical proximity to a cross-border market. Such markets also allow women producers to access inputs for production from these markets including tools, food materials, fabrics, etc., at reasonable prices and close to their own supply points. This also creates opportunities for two-way interactions among women in trade (Mathew, 2018).

5.1.2 Linking Women in Trade to GVCs

GVCs are providing women with significant opportunity for gainful employment, as well as for participation in international trade. ILO estimates of the more than 453 million jobs created by GVCs in trade in 40 OECD Members and four BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) (ILO, 2016), 42% have been taken up by women (ILO, 2015).

This offers unprecedented opportunity for women in trade. Targeted trade policy initiatives could ensure that as economies place themselves at various levels of skill on these GVCs, women are also placed in higher-value-added, higher income jobs, with more job security in this framework.

Such efforts would include strengthening markets for women-oriented sectors, and supporting women with control over resources, and decision-making power (Blackmore and Ajambo, 2022). As export diversification across economies results in progressing to capital-intensive and higher value-added sectors in GVCs, the WTO also underscores the value of enabling more inclusive management practices among businesses, which can then provide more opportunities and roles for the participation of women in GVCs (World Bank and WTO, 2020). Leveraging trade agreements, and other avenues of economic cooperation, to create mechanisms of cooperation to encourage access to resources, including finance and digital technologies, for women, will also facilitate their more effective participation in value chains.

5.1.3 Trade Facilitation

Simplifying and Automating Trade and Transit Procedures

Measures to reduce the cost and complexity of trade and transit require initiatives to simplify documentation and administrative requirements, reduce the complexity and duplication in transit procedures, reduce red tape and cut the time required for administrative and transit procedures. Several measures could contribute to this objective. These include automation of trade and transit processes, moving towards paperless trade and digitalization of trade and transit procedures, and

improving access to accurate and updated trade related information. Prompt, effective implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) by Members would contribute to this end.

In addition to reducing the cost and complexity of trade and transit procedures, which have an unequal impact on women in trade, this would also serve to reduce the possibility of harassment of women traders at customs posts, and contribute to resolving safety and security concerns of women traders.

Safer Customs and Transit Posts

Safety of women at customs and border posts, and during transit procedures is paramount. In addition to automating and digitising processes to reduce opportunities for harassment and violence against women, it would also be necessary to take steps at customs posts, including increasing the number of women officials at transit and customs posts; improving security at transit posts across trading routes for both, women traders and women officials at these posts; training of women officials deployed at these posts; and developing programs and workshops for gender sensitization of all administrators, customs and border officials, as well as policymakers. This requires efforts both, at the national level, as well as in cooperation with trade partners.

Cooperation among partners can also support such initiatives at the national level, by working on collectively improving the safety and security of border and transit posts, for women, and in conducting collaborative programmes and workshops aimed at ensure gender- sensitization of customs officials.

5.1.4 Access to finance

Improving and facilitating access to finance for women in trade is a matter of both domestic policy as well as international cooperation. At the level of domestic policy, providing clear guidelines to reduce barriers to women's ability to access finance, simplifying procedures, and reducing the need for additional checks and collateral would be necessary. It would also be important to provide women with legal protection of enforceable rights to ensure access to financial infrastructure, including for simple transactions such as seamless opening of bank accounts, and not being denied authorisation to undertaking basic transactions (Thystrup).

Facilitation can be supported with leveraging digital technologies to automate processes, monitor credit histories and digital footprints to foster accountability and trust (for example, by linking it to the national IDs and bank databases), nullifying the need for additional checks and balances required for women seeking access to finance. Digital platforms and repositories can also provide for robust benchmarking, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms, with support from the private sector, to ensure that initiatives towards such access to finance are effectively implemented. It will also be helpful to use digital platforms to provide information, knowledge and guidance to working women on financial instruments, and on leveraging trade finance optimally.

In parallel, trade agreements can also provide effective platforms to develop mechanisms of cooperation to improve access to trade finance for women in trade, and for industries with greater participation of women in the workforce. Triangular cooperation can be leveraged to find additional avenues of providing necessary financial support to women in trade.

Cooperation can also be leveraged to provide women necessary information and knowledge pertaining to financial instruments, and may also be useful in giving women the tools to be self-sufficient in understanding and leveraging available financial tools and resources.

Collaborative action to digitise financial instruments, adopt blended finance approaches, and leverage alternate financing mechanisms such as supply chain finance is essential (IFC, 2024).

5.1.5 Access to technology

For women to be able to use technology to participate in trade, they need to have access to technology, familiarity with platforms and the digital medium, and the skills necessary to harness its potential. This journey begins with access, and bridging the gender-differentiated digital divide.

Making access to technology geographically neutral, to ensure that even the most remotely located communities have access to technological tools; addressing social biases that prevent women from using technological tools and devices; providing financing options for women to own technological tools to enable their participation in the economy, both as consumers and producers; and ensuring that digital regulation accounts for the specific requirements, challenges and opportunities pertaining to women as users and developers of technological tools, will provide the first steps in ensuring that women are not deprived of access to technology. Such efforts would benefit from international cooperation and among trading partners.

In addition, international cooperation can supplement these efforts by working on more effective models of collection of gender-disaggregated data need for better-informed research on barriers on the ability of women to access and harness digital technology (UN Women, 2023).

Cooperation can also address the issue of representation of women in the development of international frameworks for digital security and governance. Gender-considerate digital regulation will reduce barriers women deal with in accessing technology. International cooperation can also support efforts at the national level to ensure more effective, less costly, and more secure access to technological devices and tools.

5.2 Addressing Capacity Constraints

Constraints to capacity are perhaps the most significant in limiting the participation of women in trade. This includes, most significantly, gaps in education, skills, and vocational training; limited digital literacy; limited knowledge or understanding of trade policy and regulations impacting trade; and limited understanding of instruments of trade finance. The scale and diversity of capacity building required to fully, and effectively enable the integration of women in trade necessitates structured collaboration between the public and private sectors in this regard.

The role of such international cooperation is multi-pronged, and would include, inter alia:

- Conducting necessary surveys and research to support the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated trade and skill data to assess the impact of trade policy on the participation of women in trade;
- Understanding the specific capacity gaps across the diversity of women in trade;
- Working with national governments to develop capacity building programmes, workshops, and platforms; and
- Exchanging knowledge, information and best practices to assist countries in better structuring their capacity-building programmes.

5.2.1 Education, Skills, Training

To be able to engage in trade in more upstream, high-skill, high income roles, with more job security, structured work hours, and with safer work, more sensitive work environments, women need leverage. Leverage comes from education.

Therefore, education, skilling, and training of women must be prioritised. This includes creating opportunities to allow women to pursue higher education, including an increased focus for more inclusion of women in higher-value added, employable academic skills such as STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) education programmes. It also includes targeted skill development and training programmes catered to their chosen industry or sector, both on skilling for the workplace, as well as skills necessary for trade and trade-related activities. To this end, there is a need to ensure that policy frameworks are designed to ensure that women have access to targeted skill development and vocational training, where skills are mapped to job requirements on the market.

This requires the assessment and identification of the gaps between existing skilling and training programmes, and the skills actually required on the job. This assessment would have to be mapped against the export basket of the national economy, and then mapped back to developing curricula that plugs those gaps. National skill development and vocational programmes would have to prioritise capacity building for women to encourage their participation in trade.

Such capacity building would also include programmes targeted at providing women trade-related skill development, including for women in business, to upskill them towards participation in higher value-added, higher-income activities in trade. It is also necessary to train women in understanding trade regulations, statistics, and tools.

International cooperation can support and supplement these initiatives, and provide inputs from analysis of gender-disaggregated data from global markets, and other markets with similar trade baskets or trajectories. Cooperation could also support the development and delivery of skill development and vocational training programmes for women.

5.2.2 Digital Literacy

There is an urgent need to invest in skill development and technical training programs on the use of digital technologies in trade, for women, in sectors and roles that women can explore, especially in the digitally-enabled platform economy and gig economy. These would also include, inter alia, trainings on the use of digital technologies in trade, skilling women in trade across roles and geographies in the use of digital technologies for economic activity, and in particular for cross-border trade.

International cooperation can support efforts at the national levels to bridge the gender-differentiated divide on capacity to use digital technologies, through capacity building and technical assistance programmes, as well as through exchange of knowledge, information, and best practices on promoting and fostering increased digital literacy among women.

5.2.3 Understanding Trade Policy and Regulation

Programmes, workshops, and training programmes that help women understand and navigate the complex web of trade policy, regulations, and requirements across various geographies are necessary to ensure their effective participation in trade. In addition, it is important to equip women with the technical knowledge and in-depth understanding of transit requirements, licensing, certification and qualification requirements, as well as the tools to find, analyse and interpret trade statistics, tariff information, and other trade-related information from across potential export markets, to help them economise their businesses and comply with requirements with ease (including with minimal implications for cost and time).

Several governments and international organisations are developing schemes and tools to assist women entrepreneurs as well as MSMEs that employ or collaborate with women in income generating, trade-related activities. Such programmes, often supported by government and non-governmental organisations, as well as by the private sector, are necessary to provide women the toolkit they need to optimise their participation in trade.

International cooperation could support such initiatives through the development and delivery of programmes for targeted skill development and training for participation in trade, including in demystifying the web of regulations and policies impacting trade across geographies, and in understanding and harnessing trade agreements.

It is also important to harness the opportunities and tools offered by digital technologies to allow for international cooperation through exchange of knowledge, sharing of best practices, and to allow women in trade to access resources from across the globe to develop and hone their skills and understanding.

5.2.4 Understanding Trade Finance

For women to access trade finance, and to harness its potential in participating effectively in cross-border trade, women need to have adequate knowledge and understanding of the various instruments

and sources of trade finance. Equipping women with this information and guidance would be a necessary step in enabling them in trade.

Such efforts can be undertaken at the national level, as well as in cooperation with partners internationally, leveraging digital platforms to collate and disseminate knowledge and guidance for women, and to allow them to connect with experts and with other women, and hone their understanding, peer-to-peer, including through shared experiences. International organisations such as WTO, ITC, IFC, and UNCTAD can play a significant role in facilitating such collaborative initiatives.

5.2.5 Public-Private Collaboration + Digital Technologies

Women are nearly half the global population, and can amount, therefore, to half the global workforce. They play diverse roles in economic activity, including in trade, and are differentiated by geography, social and economic placement, skills, interests, opportunities, and access.

This makes capacity building for 'women in trade' a task of unimaginable scale, diversity, and complexity. This is not a task for one entity, or one type of entity. It necessitates, by definition, two things.

One, collaboration across public and private sector as well as international organisations and non-governmental institutions, for a multi-pronged approach.

Two, the need to harness digital technologies for effective development and delivery of capacity-building programmes.

Public-private collaboration can take various forms, including, inter alia, implementation of policy initiatives that enable women in the workforce, and working with industry on management directives to foster the necessary ecosystem to ensure effective, productive participation of women at the workplace, with consistency and longevity. The private sector must also seek to invest in women-owned businesses, and help them connect with GVCs.

Private sector cooperation will also be necessary to map and bridge the gap between skills and job requirements, and in developing and delivering the requisite capacity building, skill development, and vocational training programmes, at the necessary scale and reach, backed by the appropriate infrastructure and logistics.

Robust, scalable, digital platforms must be leveraged for seamless, structured, and standardised delivery of capacity-building programmes. The same platforms can also be used to create an ecosystem of knowledge, cooperation, and support for women in trade to allow them to learn, grow, connect and collaborate - accessing information, connecting with markets, seeking legal and accounting advice, sharing experiences, and receiving and providing trainings and skill development programs, and investing in digital skills for women in trade, for each specific category of women in trade, based on their specific requirements. This will also be a significant area of cooperation among trading

partners, as well as for national governments to mainstream active gender inclusivity in trade policy and related domestic reforms.

5.3 Gender-Disaggregated Data

While processes to capture trade data accurately have evolved significantly over the last few decades, making it possible to capture data on services, e-commerce, value-added components of exports, and even data on services embedded in manufacturing, statistics on trade disaggregated by gender continue to evade experts.

For an accurate understanding of the participation of women in trade, the trends, sectors, activities, formats, and roles, as well as the challenges faced by women in trade (and therefore the nature and content of capacity-building programmes), analysts need gender-disaggregated data from all sources, sectors, geographies, and entities.

This requires standardisation of definitions, formats, classification, and data capture and mining methodologies. It also necessitates cooperation across economies and stakeholders – private and public, at the point of production, value-add, sale, end-use, and transit posts, for all sectors and industries – primary, manufacturing and services, including digitally traded goods and services. Cooperation among trade partners should seek to standardise how the contribution of women is estimated, quantified, or recorded in each transaction, the ratio of women-men in each transaction, and the reasons for the skewed ratio, where that is the case.

There is no question that this is a mammoth task. This is why the WTO Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment places particular emphasis on encouraging Members to capture and collate gender-disaggregated data, and develop analysis of gender-focused trade related statistics, complete with an inventory of data sources (UNCTAD, 2020). OECD also emphasises that, to inform trade policy on gender-differentiated market access, there is a need to “upstream the use of gender-differentiated impact analysis to understand the potential impacts of trade policy changes, or new trade agreements on women, including their indirect effects.” (OECD, 2021b)

The private sector will play a key role in this process by collecting better statistics and collating more structured information on women in the workforce, in particular in GVCs, to understand better both the roles women are undertaking in value chains, as well as the impact of GVCs on participation of women in the workforce (Barrientos and Pallangyo, 2020).

Cooperation among trading partners can be built into trade agreements, including on standardisation and harmonisation of specifications, and interoperability of systems and methodologies. Such cooperation can also be leveraged in the actual collection of gender-disaggregated trade data, gender-based studies, and analysis of transit posts. Partners can also build cooperation on impact assessment of trade measures and regulations on women in trade, into the periodic review and monitoring mechanisms of their trade agreements.

5.4 Representation: Need for Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement

For any of these initiative and efforts to actually work, what is most important is representation and inclusive, effective, continuous and structured stakeholder engagement. Gender-balancing trade policy requires effective representation of women at the table, in identifying roles, opportunities, challenges and solutions, in decision making, and policy and regulatory drafting, as well as in the design and implementation of capacity-building programs. Just being at the table is not enough, having the voices of women heard, recorded, and acted on, is critical.

This must include women across roles in trade, across geographies, levels of development, social and economic strata, enterprise size, sector, and industry. Models of engagement can include focus groups, direct interviews and surveys, inputs from civil society (OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Promoting Gender Equality), workshops, conferences and seminars, community discussions, both formal and informal, use of digital platforms, and use of tools to aggregate information and services, and industry-interlinkages (NITI Aayog, 2021), etc. Engagement must be a continuous process, with feedback loops, and structured review, monitoring, and revision. The private sector can, and absolutely must, play a significant role (Bajaj, 2021).

The scale and nature of the challenge also necessitates the use of digital technologies for more inclusive, effective engagement (Bajaj, 2021). Women in trade and related activities can leverage digital platforms to connect, collaborate, and engage, exchange information, experiences, and best practices, provide mentorship and support within the community, collate voices and provide inputs that can then inform decision making, policy, and capacity-building programmes.

6. Conclusion

Trade policy is not gender neutral. As a matter of fact, it cannot be. To counter the inherent disadvantages of social, institutional, and structural constructs, and access and capacity constraints specific to women, policy, including trade policy, needs to actively and continuously neutralise these inherent disadvantages, and create an ecosystem where men and women are on the same playing field in economic activity, and therefore in trade.

This requires trade policy to be gender-balancing (at the very least). In collaboration with other structural, institutional, and social reforms, and supported with international cooperation, gender-balancing trade policy must counter gender-differentiated limitations by ensuring that women have access to resources, finance, markets, support and security, as well as the capacity - skills, training, and knowledge - to engage in cross-border trade and related activities to their fullest potential.

However, these efforts will only work if women have inclusive, adequate, effective representation in the strategy, design, and implementation of each step, and in each effort or initiative.

Public-private cooperation, leveraging digital technologies, will be necessary to drive the scale and diversity of such efforts. The ecosystem would have to be kept continually optimal with continuous monitoring and review of outcomes, built on inclusive feedback loops.

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