



POLICY
BRIEF

12

Women and Trade:

Towards an Enabling Ecosystem in India

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Abstract

In recent years India has increasingly come to recognize the importance of empowering women and promoting gender equality in its growth story. However, the multitude of schemes and initiatives supporting entrepreneurship among women are primarily focussed on handholding early-stage development. The focus is on capacity building, mentoring and small value collateral free starting loans. Support for internationalization of women-owned enterprises through targeted measures to boost women's participation in international trade has lagged. This policy brief identifies the key gaps and recommends an active affirmative strategy of *gender mainstreaming* across three composite elements of the enabling ecosystem for trade – a clear guiding vision, institutional set-up and international cooperation. It is recommended that the upcoming Foreign Trade Policy which is slated for 2021-2026 be used to mainstream gender in the national trade agenda. The recognition of the gender specific impediments and vulnerabilities that women entrepreneurs face should be reflected in both the vision and strategy, with a holistic focus on export promotion, integration in global value chains (GVCs), ease of doing business, and trade facilitation. Secondly, there is need for a robust institutional set-up underpinned by support programs and incentives, regular gender consultation, timely collection of gender disaggregated data and impact assessment. With gender equality considerations gaining traction in bilateral and multilateral trade discussions and agreements, India should also include women entrepreneurs as important stakeholders in domestic consultations on free trade agreements and their aspirations and concerns should be reflected in the final texts through gender responsive provisions.

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Women and Trade: Towards an Enabling Ecosystem in India

Nisha Taneja, Sanjana Joshi and Shravani Prakash

1. A Demographic Shift is Gradually Gathering Pace in India

India has 1020 females per 1000 males, according to the *National Family Health Survey (NFHS 2019-21)*. The debate on the veracity of these headline numbers notwithstanding, a demographic shift is gradually gathering pace in India. In the 2011 Census of India, the sex ratio was 940 females per 1000 males, up from 933 females per 1000 males in 2001. Based on this, the report of the technical group on population projections, titled *Population Projections for India and States 2011-2036*, published in November 2019 by the National Commission on Population under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has observed that that the country's population in 2036 is expected to be more feminine than in 2011. The country's sex ratio of the total population (females per 1000 males) is expected to increase to 957 females per 1000 males by 2036.

2. However, India Ranks 140 in the Global Gender Gap Index

India's rank is 140 among the 156 surveyed countries in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, down by 28 places. The Index benchmarks the evolution of gender-based gaps among four key dimensions:

- Economic Participation and Opportunity;
- Educational Attainment;
- Health and Survival; and
- Political Empowerment.

While in 2021 the gender gap is especially acute in the category of political empowerment, India's performance in the category of economic participation and opportunity also shows a downward trend. The NITI Aayog's *SDG India Index & Dashboard 2020-21* also notes that gender equality and zero hunger remain the two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that require 'special attention' in order to achieved the targets set for 2030.

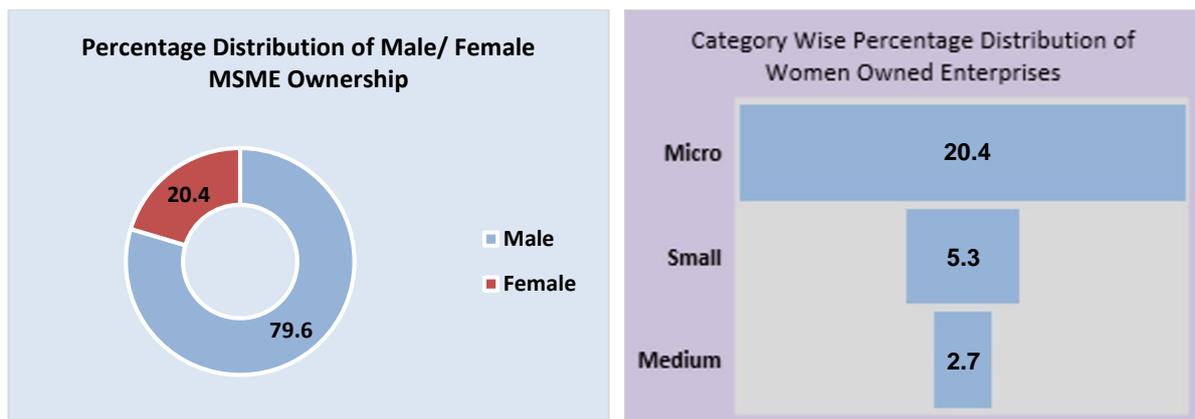
In India, far fewer women are part of the workforce than men, across all the States, both in rural and urban areas. As per the *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS): Annual Report (July 2019 – June 2020)* conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO), the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among the country's female population is only 22.8 percent while for men it is 56.8 percent. As per the *World Bank* less than a third of working age women - 15 years or older - are working or actively looking for a job. While some of this could be positively ascribed to increasing focus on education, especially in the age group of 15 to 24, education does not seem to automatically translate into better outcomes. According to the *Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)*, in 2018-19, 53 per cent of all fresh graduates were

women. Yet, only 8.4 per cent of urban women of 15 years or more were employed in 2018-19. This fell to 7.3 per cent in 2019-20 and it is likely to have fallen to less than 6 per cent in 2020-21 due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic.

Women also earn less than male workers. Even among the highly educated, women in India earn 19 percent less than their male counterparts. In fact, according to the *Monster Salary Index*, the gender pay gap increases with more years of tenure and higher education.

Further, the gender gap in the entrepreneurial space in India remains a challenge. According to the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor India National Report 2020-21*, of the 58.5 million entrepreneurs in India only 14 percent are women and of these almost 80 percent are small-sized and self-financed. Similarly, as per the *Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Annual Report 2020-21*, only 20 per cent of proprietary MSMEs are owned by women and of these the overwhelming majority are micro enterprises (Figure 1). While 20 percent of micro enterprises are owned by women, only about 5 percent of small enterprises and 2 percent of the medium enterprises are owned by women (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Owned by Women in India



Source: Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Annual Report 2020-21, Government of India

India ranked 49 among 58 countries in the *Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2020 Report* that takes into account 12 indicators and 25 sub-indicators spanning Advancement Outcomes, Knowledge Assets and Financial Access, and Supporting Entrepreneurial Conditions.

Despite being the third largest startup nation and having over 27,000 startups, India still has only 5 per cent women startup founders. Among the 136 unicorn startup founders in India, only five are female.

3. Economic Empowerment of Women & Promoting Gender Equality is ‘Smart’ Economics’

Addressing these gender gaps is vital for India’s economic growth and prosperity. The pursuit of gender equality has evolved from a “rights-based approach” in the socio-cultural context to become a key developmental concern with the spotlight set on women’s economic empowerment. As pointed out by UN Women, the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, women’s economic empowerment is central to realizing women’s rights and gender equality. In turn, women’s economic empowerment boosts productivity, increases economic diversification and income equality and supports resilient and sustainable development outcomes.

Women’s economic empowerment is also highly connected to poverty reduction because women tend to invest their earnings more in their family’s development and their communities. Indeed, the idea that gender equality is smart economics underpins the World Bank estimate that India could boost its growth by 1.5 percentage points if around 50 percent of the women join the work force.

4. The Importance of an Enabling Ecosystem for Catalysing Women Entrepreneurship has Gained Traction in India

With women constituting almost half the population, India is coming to recognize the importance of empowering women and promoting gender equality in its growth story. According to the report Powering the Economy with Her, focused efforts on enabling women entrepreneurs could, by 2030, increase direct employment by around 50 million to 60 million people and increase indirect and induced employment of another 100 million to 110 million people. This will bridge nearly 25 per cent of the jobs required to absorb the working-age population in 2030.

The growing appreciation of the need to unlock the economic potential of women’s entrepreneurship has, in recent years, provided a push to multiple actors (government, trade and investment support institutions, international organizations, NGOs, corporate sector) to bolster the enabling ecosystem for women entrepreneurship. These enabling actions especially at the government level can be broadly categorised along four pillars: capacity building and skill development; financial inclusion, early-stage support and access to markets (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Four Pillars of Enabling Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurship



Some of the notable policy level schemes and initiatives, both by the Central as well as State Governments, are highlighted below:

Table 1: Capacity Building and Skill Development Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurship by Government of India

Capacity Building and Skill Development	
Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)	This flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) initiated in 2016 is implemented by National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC). The objective is to enable Indian youth to take up industry-relevant skill training. Around 40 per cent of the 73 lakh candidates trained under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana between 2016 and 2020 were women candidates.
Women's Vocational Training Programme (WVTP)	Launched in 1977 to mainstream women into economic activities, this project promotes vocational training for women for wage-employment in industry, as instructors and also promotes their self-employment. The Program offers Industrial skill training under Craftsmen Training Scheme (CTS); Instructor skill training under Craft Instructors Training Scheme (CITS); Demand-driven Short-term courses; Special programs for training Instructors; and tailor-made courses as per industry's demand. The vocational training to women is currently being imparted through 18 National Skill Training Institutes for Women" (NSTIs for Women).
NSDC-Britannia Marie Gold My Startup Contest	Launched in 2019 by NSDC in partnership with Britannia Marie Gold with the aim to create a platform which can support homemakers to start their own businesses. It provides the participants an opportunity to win Rs.10 lakhs, enrolment in a digital business training program in collaboration with Google and mentorship sessions from industry experts.
SheTrades & UPS Project: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in India	The SheTrades and UPS project <i>Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in India</i> launched in September 2020 in partnership with the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) and India SME Forum comprises of tailored capacity building activities to improve competitiveness, and strengthening the online offerings, and personalised coaching & mentoring of select women owned businesses around three broad themes: digital transformation, access to finance and resilience.
NSDC Partnership with Microsoft	Announced in October 2020 this initiative will impart digital skills to more than one lakh underserved women in rural communities over 10 months. As part of the collaboration, more than 70 hours of course content will be made available free of cost, covering topics such as digital literacy, enhancing employability, nano entrepreneurship, and communication skills.

Table 2: Financial Inclusion Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurship by Government of India

Financial Inclusion	
<u>Mudra Loans under the Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY)</u>	Launched in 2015 the scheme provides collateral free loans up to Rs 10 lakhs to non-corporate, non-farm small/micro enterprises engaged in manufacturing, processing, trading, service sector activities and activities allied to agriculture. The programme is being implemented across the country by Banks, MFIs & NBFCs and a separate credit guarantee fund has been created for MUDRA loans. Women Entrepreneurs are a targeted category in the MUDRA loans and majority loans have been sanctioned to women entrepreneurs since the scheme's inception.
<u>Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP)</u>	Under this credit linked subsidy program for unemployed youth and traditional artisans the focus is on generating self-employment opportunities through micro-enterprise. Women entrepreneurs are covered under the Special Category. For women the own contribution requirement is only 5 per cent of the project cost while for general category it is 10 per cent. Women are also entitled to 25 per cent and 35 per cent subsidies for the project set up in urban and rural areas respectively.
<u>The Bhartiya Mahila Bank</u>	Schemes by the Bhartiya Mahila Bank (now acquired by State Bank of India) offer women entrepreneurs loans up to ₹20 Crores for working capital requirements, business expansion, or manufacturing enterprises. There are different plans under the loan scheme for loans to self-employed women or homemakers planning a startup; for self-employed women or homemakers to set up day-care creches; and for food entrepreneurs wanting to start or expand their small businesses (Annapurna Yojana).
<u>Business Loans for Women from Banks</u>	Several public sector Banks have special loan schemes in place for supporting capital requirements of women entrepreneurs. Some of these include - SBI Stree Shakti Package for Women Entrepreneurs in India Dena Shakti Scheme by Dena Bank Udyogini Scheme by Punjab and Sind Bank Cent Kalyani Scheme by Central Bank of India Orient Mahila Vikas Yojana Scheme by Oriental Bank of Commerce.

Table 3: Initiatives for Early-stage Support for Women Entrepreneurship by Government of India

Early-stage Support	
Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP)	NITI Aayog launched a Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), in 2018, for providing an ecosystem for budding & existing women entrepreneurs across the country. As an enabling platform, WEP is built on three pillars- <i>Iccha Shakti</i> , <i>Gyaan Shakti</i> & <i>Karma Shakti</i> , with <i>Iccha Shakti</i> motivating aspiring entrepreneurs; <i>Gyaan Shakti</i> providing knowledge; and <i>Karma Shakti</i> providing hands-on support such as free credit ratings, mentorship, funding support to women entrepreneurs, apprenticeship and corporate partnerships. WEP also offers incubation and acceleration support to women founded / co-founded startups through its various partners who handhold women entrepreneurs registered with WEP and provide them necessary support to help them start and scale-up.
Atal Incubation Centre, ALEAP Women Entrepreneurs Hub (AIC ALEAP We-Hub), Telangana	The AIC ALEAP We-Hub is an effort towards creating a supportive ecosystem for world class innovative start-ups by women. In partnership with the ATAL Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog, the Association of Lady Entrepreneurs of India (ALEAP) in Telangana is focused on 6 sectors - Biodegradable technologies, Biotechnology, Food Processing, Garmenting & Textiles, IT & ITES, Electronics & Engineering and 3D Printing. It provides co-working spaces and services relating to knowledge support, mentoring, seed-funding, machinery, technology transfer, regulatory compliance and marketing.
International Women's Trade Centre (iWTC), Kerala	Announced in February 2021 iWTC is an initiative to set up a first-of-its-kind trade centre that caters to the specific needs of women in business. It envisages to become a safe and sustainable one-stop retail and business support centre to hand-hold and encourage women in business.
Mission Niriyatak Bano, Rajasthan	The campaign launched in July 2021 is planned in six steps to register and handhold local traders aspiring to become exporters. Besides easing the processes of government clearances, the scheme also offers financial incentives and especially aims to encourage educated homemakers to become entrepreneurs and exporters.

Table 4: Initiatives by Government of India to Enhance Access to Markets for Women Entrepreneurs

Access to Markets	
Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs)	Effective from April 2019 the <i>Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises</i> , every Central Ministry /Department / PSUs is required to set an annual target for 25 per cent procurement from MSE Sector. 3 per cent from within the 25 per cent target is earmarked for procurement from Micro and Small Enterprises owned by women.
Womaniya on GeM	Government e Marketplace (GeM) is a 100 per cent government owned company setup under the aegis of Ministry of Commerce and Industry for procurement of common use goods and services by Government ministries. In January 2019 it has launched <i>Womaniya on GeM</i> as an initiative to enable women entrepreneurs and women self-help groups to sell handicrafts and handloom, accessories, jute and coir products, home décor and office furnishings, directly to various Government ministries, departments and institutions.

5. The Glass is Half-filled

It is evident that women's entrepreneurship has begun to receive attention from the policy establishment in India in recent years. However, the enabling ecosystem for women entrepreneurship is fragmented with the various schemes and incentives spread across different ministries, departments, and other agencies. There is no dedicated lead institution focused on unleashing the entrepreneurial capacity of women and steering an integrated approach to the design, implementation, and impact assessment of the input support across the four pillars outlined above.

Also, the multitude of schemes and initiatives supporting entrepreneurship among women are primarily focussed on handholding early-stage development. The focus is on capacity building, mentoring and small value collateral free starting loans. But support for internationalization of women-owned enterprises through targeted measures to boost women's participation in international trade has lagged.

However, there is a need to recognize that just as lack of financial resources, time and mobility constraints, poor access to information and societal gender bias that inhibit women from starting businesses - these impediments also hinder women from successfully accessing export markets to trade products and services globally. In relation to their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs pursuing foreign markets have difficulty in becoming a part of established distribution networks, face more obstacles with regard to logistics, regulatory and procedural compliance and are at a higher risk of abuse, including corruption and harassment.

At the policy level, following are some of the key gaps identified in terms of providing support and facilitation of women's participation in international trade:

- a) The Foreign Trade Policy, 2015-20 (extended till March 31, 2022) provides a framework for increasing exports of goods and services as well as generation of employment and increasing value addition in the country. The focus of the government is to support both the manufacturing and services sectors, with a special emphasis on improving the ease of doing business. The Foreign Trade Policy Statement explains the vision, goals and objectives underpinning the Foreign Trade Policy for the period 2015-2020, as updated through the mid-term review completed in December 2017.

However, both documents, with a near absence of even the use of the word women, are gender neutral or rather actually gender blind. The difference is that while gender-neutral policies are not specifically aimed at either men or women and are assumed to affect both sexes equally, gender blindness is the failure to recognize that the needs of men and women are different. In comparison to the absence of the gender dimension in the trade policy, MSMEs have been explicitly acknowledged to have strategic significance, especially with regard to manufacturing and employment generation, and are accordingly identified for focussed interventions to boost exports.

- b) India is a signatory to the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), which is an important international framework for reducing trade costs. A National Committee on Trade Facilitation (NCTF) has been set up to facilitate implementation of the provisions. However, as pointed out in the National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (NTFAP) 2020-2023, "*gender mainstreaming is the only parameter on which India has not performed as well as its regional counterparts*" in the Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation organized by the United Nations.

Accordingly, the NTFAP specifically recommends the promotion of "gender inclusiveness in trade" as an action point. Nonetheless, while in the 2021 UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation India has scored an overall 90.3 percent as compared to 78.4 per cent in 2019, India's score is only 66 percent in the "Women in Trade Facilitation" component.

- c) India has, until now, been an active supporter of gender equality at the international level. India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979. It is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was adopted in 1995 in support of women's empowerment. India is also strongly committed to the achievement of the UN's 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and Goal 5, that aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, has been identified as a key national priority. Further, India supports the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which establishes a strong foundation to support the implementation of the SDGs. The agenda recognises the importance of international trade as an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction (paragraph 79) and specifically underlines the role it can play in promoting women's empowerment. India is also committed to address gender and women-centric issues through mutual cooperation with the G20 group of countries.

However, India has voted against the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment issued at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Conference 11 in Buenos Aires in December 2017. The Statement by India after the MC11 simply stated that "*Ministerial Decisions on new issues like Investment Facilitation, MSMEs, gender and trade, which lacked a mandate or consensus, were not taken forward.*" The Buenos Aires declaration is currently supported by 127 WTO members and observers.

- d) Gender equality is also increasingly being included in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). As noted in the 2020 ITC report on Mainstreaming Gender in Free Trade Agreements, more than a quarter of the 292 FTAs in force currently and notified to the WTO have at least one gender-explicit provision. While, for now, the level of gender responsiveness is limited in the FTAs, the trend is upward. Significant recent developments include – 2018 European Parliament resolution to include gender equality consideration in all future trade agreements it would sign; and modernization of both the Canada-Chile FTA and the Canada-Israel FTA with a dedicated chapter on

gender and trade in 2019; the 2020 Global Trade and Gender Arrangement between Canada, Chile and New Zealand; and chapter on trade and gender equality in the Australia-UK FTA signed in December 2021. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement that came into effect on January 1, 2021 and created one of the largest free trade areas in the world also has a high level of gender responsiveness including promise to muster resources to improve the export capacity of women entrepreneurs and SMEs.

However, India has adopted a cautious approach and not included gender issues in any existing FTA. Media reports suggest that the UK is demanding India to address issues around gender equality in trade and women's economic empowerment in the bilateral trade agreement being negotiated by India and the UK. India has some reservations but is reportedly open to the suggestion.

6. International Trade can Play an Important Role in Driving Economic Empowerment of Women

It is vital to encourage women entrepreneurs to expand their markets and trade internationally, because the high potential of international trade to contribute to positive outcomes for women and promote gender equality is well documented. For instance, the International Trade Centre (ITC)'s 2015 publication Unlocking Markets for Women to Trade finds that just around 20 per cent of exporting firms in developing countries are led by women entrepreneurs; and that fewer women export and import in general. However, women-owned businesses that export are more than 3.5 times productive than women-owned businesses that do not export; women entrepreneurs are more likely to employ women in comparison to men-owned and managed companies; and the average pay by exporting women-owned businesses is approximately 1.6 times higher than the average pay at non-exporting women-owned businesses.

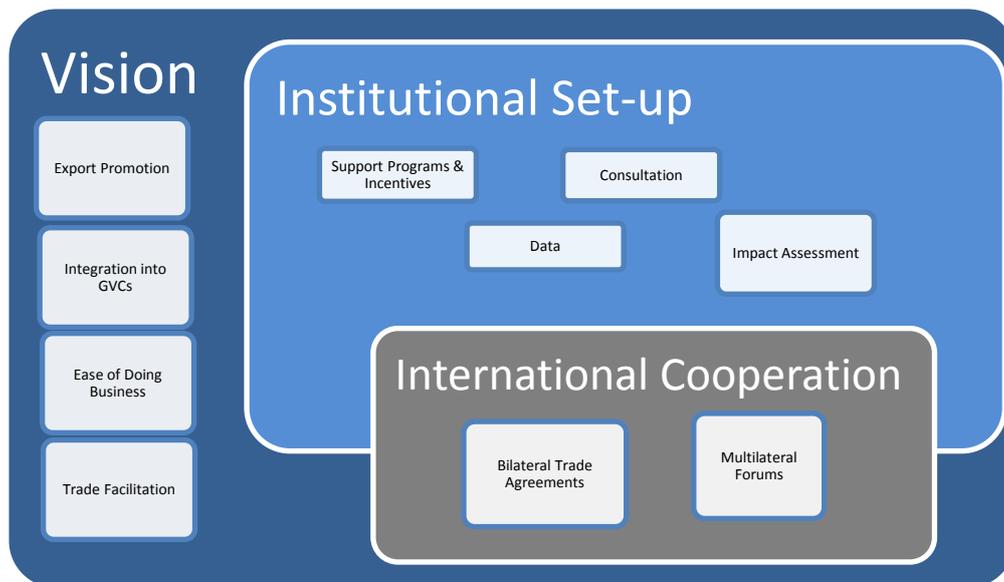
Similarly, the 2020 joint World Bank and WTO report Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Women's Equality is the latest such work to show that firms that engage in international trade employ more women; women are also better represented in firms that are part of global value chains (GVCs); women's wages are relatively higher in globally engaged firms; and women workers in trade integrated sectors are more likely to be employed formally with opportunities to receive benefits, training, and job security. The report notes that women have unique opportunities to benefit from new trends in global trade, specifically the rise in services, global value chains, and the digital economy. However, for women to fully reap these trade gains, public policies aimed at reducing discrimination toward women in trade policy, supporting women's capacity to engage in international trade and mitigating the risks from trade faced by women would be needed.

7. Policy Recommendations

To enhance the entry and successful participation of women owned/led enterprises in international trade there is need to pursue an active affirmative strategy of gender mainstreaming across all the composite elements of the enabling ecosystem for trade. First and

foremost, there is need for a vision that is guided by the objectives of export promotion, integration into global value chains (GVCs), ease of doing business and trade facilitation for women entrepreneurs. Secondly, there is need for a robust institutional set-up underpinned by support programs and incentives, regular gender consultation, timely collection of gender disaggregated data and impact assessment. Finally, these domestic efforts must be complimented by international cooperation efforts (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Composite Elements of an Enabling Trade Ecosystem



1. **The National Policy for Empowerment of Women** had been adopted in 2001 by the Government of India, with the objective to bring about the advancement, development, and empowerment of women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. It was directed towards achieving inclusive growth with special focus on women. Considering new opportunities and challenges, a new draft was announced in 2016, outlining the vision, mission, objectives, priority areas and operational strategies. However, it still awaits approval by the Cabinet. It is vital that an updated policy is adopted at the earliest, with entrepreneurship and international trade as key focus areas to anchor a clear national vision on economic empowerment of women. The policy should also set targets and be refreshed and recharged every five years.
2. In December 2018, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced the constitution of an “Expert Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises” to propose long term solutions, for the economic and financial sustainability of the MSME sector. The Report of the Expert Committee submitted in 2019 recommended that at the apex level a *National Council for MSMEs* should be set up under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister to facilitate coherent policy outlook and unity of monitoring. It also suggested that the states should have a similar State Council for MSMEs. We recommend that, in addition, an apex *National Council for Women’s Entrepreneurship* should be set up along similar lines to steer coordinated support to women entrepreneurship and to facilitate its growth.

3. The upcoming *Foreign Trade Policy (FTP)*, which is slated for 2021-2026, and the corresponding *Foreign Trade Policy Statement* provide an immediate opportunity to mainstream gender in the national trade agenda. They can be used for underlining support for women entrepreneurs as a key pathway in the endeavour for both goods and services exports from India to touch US\$1 trillion each. The recognition of the gender specific impediments and vulnerabilities that women entrepreneurs face should be reflected in both the vision and strategy, with a holistic focus on export promotion, integration in global value chains (GVCs), ease of doing business, and trade facilitation. The overall support programs and schemes should consider adding specific provisions for women. These can take the form of waiving off part or full application fees for mandatory compliances such as IEC registration; shorter timelines for processing of various applications; lower threshold for women in the schemes based on annual turnover categorization; higher percentage of financial support in the assistance schemes etc. The gender dimension should also be integrated into the ease of doing business and trade facilitation measures in line with the ‘Whole-of-Government’ approach of the FTP.
4. The collection of detailed, timely and relevant data along with regular consultation and engagement with women business associations is vital for informed policy making and impact assessment. The existing institutional framework across the gamut of relevant ministries, allied regulatory agencies, export promotion councils, specific product promoting boards etc. for trade promotion should proactively adopt gender mainstreaming measures. This is especially needed with respect to collection of **gender disaggregated data** and statistics on trade participation and performance as well as regular **gender stakeholder consultation** to make the institutional framework effective and dynamic.
5. **Trade facilitation** geared towards simplification, modernization and harmonization of export and import processes has emerged as an important focus area in international trade. The Union Budget 2022-23 has announced focus on *Ease of Doing Business EODB 2.0* underpinned by the idea of ‘trust-based governance’ and qualitative improvements. Gender mainstreaming should be an integral aspect of the execution and implementation of the initiatives in this respect. Further, trade facilitation measures must consider the infrastructure and safety related concerns of women at the sea and land ports which are the gateways for India’s trade with the world. The recent initiatives taken by the Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI) are a good example for other agencies related to trade facilitation to work in the same direction.
6. At the international level, gender equality considerations are gaining traction in bilateral and multilateral trade discussions and agreements. Traditionally India has been wary of linking non-trade/progressive issues such as human rights, labour standards, gender, and environment with trade, both bilaterally and multilaterally, by and large regarding them as ‘veiled protectionism’. However, with the global discourse veering towards inclusiveness in trade and sustainability, more so in the context of the COVID 19

pandemic, India should embrace a more flexible and pragmatic approach and not lag behind the curve. Specifically:

- In bilateral FTAs under negotiation (with the EU, Canada, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel, Australia, UK etc.), India should include women entrepreneurs as important stakeholders in domestic consultations and their aspirations and concerns should be reflected in the finally agreed text.
- At the multilateral level, a good starting point would be to join the *Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender* (IWG) established at the WTO in 2020. Participation in this Informal Working Group is open to all WTO members and provides India an opportunity to be an insider rather than an outlier.



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