



POLICY BRIEF #67

Gender Provisions in India's Free Trade Agreements: **A Work in Progress**

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MARCH 2026



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Abstract

Unlike a decade ago, when trade and gender received limited attention at the multilateral level, in countries across the globe, there is now a growing understanding that greater participation of women in trade generates broader economic gains. However, for trade to deliver more inclusive outcomes, women must be more systematically integrated into trade policy and related institutional frameworks by governments. Evolving from a development-for-women approach to women-led development, which places significance on women as drivers of economic and social progress, the inclusion of gender provisions in the FTAs signed by India, in recent years, marks an important transition. India has traditionally been cautious of linking so-called ‘non-trade/progressive issues’, including gender, both bilaterally and multilaterally, by and large regarding them as ‘veiled protectionism’. This policy brief undertakes a gender-lens assessment of India’s FTAs concluded over the last 10 years, from February 2016 to February 2026. During this period, India has concluded eight major free trade agreements, of which five clearly include gender provisions in different forms, ranging from references in the preamble, individual articles within chapters, to a dedicated gender chapter. While recognising the progress made, the brief also identifies existing gaps and areas where current approaches remain limited. Based on this assessment, the policy brief offers policy recommendations to make India’s future FTAs more gender affirmative.

Keywords: *Gender and trade, gender mainstreaming in trade, gender-lens assessment, gender-responsive trade policy, foreign trade agreement (FTA)*

JEL Classification: *F13, F53, J16, O19, O24*

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Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge the experts whose thoughtful insights and active engagement with the gender and trade dialogues fostered by the *Gender and Trade Initiative at ICRIER* have enriched this policy brief. At ICRIER, our sincere thanks to Rajesh Chaudhary for assistance in designing and formatting the publication, Chhaya Singh, Library cum Documentation Officer, for her help in sourcing references, and Raj Kumar Shahi for providing IT support.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|----------|---|
| AfCFTA | African Continental Free Trade Area |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| B2B | Business to Business |
| BIT | Bilateral Investment Treaty |
| CBIC | Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs |
| CECPA | Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement |
| CEPA | Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement |
| CETA | Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement |
| CPTPP | Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership |
| CSR | Corporate Social Responsibility |
| ECTA | Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement |
| EFTA | European Free Trade Association |
| EU | European Union |
| EXIM | Export-Import Bank of India |
| FTA | Free Trade Agreement |
| FTP | Foreign Trade Policy |
| GBA+ | Gender-Based Analysis Plus |
| GoI | Government of India |
| GTAGA | Global Trade and Gender Arrangement |
| ICT | Information and Communications Technology |
| IWG | Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender |
| LPAI | Land Ports Authority of India |
| MERCOSUR | Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur) |
| MNC | Multinational Corporation |

| | |
|------|--|
| MSME | Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise |
| SIA | Sustainability Impact Assessment |
| SME | Small and Medium-sized Enterprise |
| SOP | Standard Operating Procedure |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |
| TBT | Technical Barriers to Trade |
| TEPA | Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement |
| TFEU | Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| WTO | World Trade Organisation |

Gender Provisions in India's Free Trade Agreements: A Work in Progress

Nisha Taneja, Sanjana Joshi, Vasudha Upreti and Pratik Tiwary

1. Introduction

International trade is increasingly seen as a powerful driver of gender equality. Unlike a decade ago, when trade and gender received limited attention at the multilateral level, in countries across the globe, there is now a growing understanding that greater participation of women in trade generates broader economic gains, particularly in developing countries, by raising female labour force participation, expanding household incomes, improving productivity, and strengthening long-term growth outcomes. Further, there is a greater realisation that there exists a difference in how trade opportunities are accessed by men and women, which underscores the gender gap between trade's potential and its actual outcomes.¹ Thus, there is a recognition that for trade to deliver more inclusive outcomes, women must be more systematically integrated into trade policy and related institutional frameworks by governments.

India has also evolved from a development-for-women approach to women-led development that places significance on women as drivers of economic and social progress. Enhancement and empowerment of women entrepreneurship is a key aspect of the vision of *Viksit Bharat by 2047*. However, the multitude of schemes and initiatives supporting entrepreneurship among women are primarily focused on handholding early-stage development. The focus is on capacity building, mentoring and small-value collateral-free loans.² The use of trade policy instruments to support women's participation in international trade and the internationalisation of women-owned enterprises has been limited.

The Foreign Trade Policy, 2015-20, provided a framework for increasing exports of goods and services, as well as generating employment and increasing value addition in the country. Further, the Foreign Trade Policy Statement explained 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, were gender neutral or rather, gender blind.³ In comparison to the absence of the gender dimension in the trade policy, MSMEs were explicitly acknowledged to have strategic significance, especially with regard to manufacturing and employment generation, and were accordingly identified for focused interventions to boost exports. It was expected that the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP), 2023, would include "gender" for the first time in its vision document, but the final version again missed doing so.

¹ World Bank Group. (2020, July 30). Women and trade: The role of trade in promoting gender equality. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/women-and-trade-the-role-of-trade-in-promoting-womens-equality>

² Taneja, N., Joshi, S., and Prakash, S. (2022, March). Women and trade: Towards an enabling ecosystem in India. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. Available at https://icrier.org/pdf/Policy_Brief_12.pdf

³ 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 recognise that the needs of men and women are different.

On the other hand, India has taken notable steps to mainstream gender within trade facilitation initiatives. The National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (2020-23) specifically recommended the promotion of “gender inclusiveness in trade” as an action point (Action Point 27) with a focus on capacity-building programmes, mentoring networks for businesswomen, and targeted support measures for women traders. This focus has been carried forward in the National Trade Facilitation Action Plan 3.0 (2024-27), which places dedicated emphasis on enhancing women’s and youth participation in the EXIM trade ecosystem through measurable indicators such as increasing women’s representation in trade institutions, strengthening leadership roles in trade bodies, expanding sensitisation programmes, and improving infrastructure at ports through gender-responsive facilities.

As a result, on March 8, 2024, to coincide with International Women's Day, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) issued two key circulars aimed at fostering a gender-inclusive work environment and encouraging women's participation in international trade. Also, the Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI) has adopted “Standard Operating Procedures for Mainstreaming Gender at Land Ports”. The SOP aims to incorporate gender perspectives into policy, infrastructure, and operations to enhance equality, security, and accessibility for women at India’s land ports, substantially based on ICRIER’s study on *Gender Mainstreaming at India’s Land Ports* (Taneja et. al., 2023).

At the international level, gender mainstreaming in trade agreements has also gained considerable traction. Over one-quarter of the free trade agreements notified to the WTO include at least one gender related provision.⁴ Chile has included gender chapters in ten of its FTAs, and notably, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that became operational in 2021 includes a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade and has a binding legal instrument on issues of women traders. Another important initiative has been the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement (GTAGA), founded in 2020, that encourages action toward mutually supportive trade and gender policies with a focus on increasing the number of women entrepreneurs in trade. The initiative currently has eleven members, including Australia, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, and Brazil. Another important milestone has been 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, after which the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG) was established at the WTO in 2020, which is open to all WTO members.

However, India has adopted a cautious approach. In fact, traditionally, India has been wary of linking so-called ‘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’ (Taneja et. al., 2022). India voted against the Buenos

⁴ International Trade Centre (ITC). (2020). Mainstreaming gender in free trade agreements. ITC. Retrieved from https://www.intracen.org/sites/default/files/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/ITC_Mainstream_Gender_FTA_20200707_web.pdf

Aires Joint Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment and has also opted not to join the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender at the WTO.

In this background, the inclusion of gender provisions in the FTAs signed by India, in recent years, particularly the inclusion of a dedicated chapter on “Trade and Gender Equality” in the India-UK CETA, marks an important transition. This policy brief undertakes a gender-lens assessment of India’s FTAs concluded over the last decade. While recognising the progress made, the brief also identifies existing gaps and areas where current approaches remain limited. Based on this assessment, the policy brief offers policy recommendations to make India’s future FTAs more gender responsive.

2. Gender Provisions in India’s Free Trade Agreements

In the last 10 years, from February 2016 to February 2026, India has significantly expanded its portfolio of international trade agreements with eight major trade agreements (Table 1). This strategic recalibration has been shaped by global supply-chain disruptions, geopolitical uncertainties, weakening multilateral institutions, and India’s own ambition to position itself as a manufacturing and export powerhouse.

Alongside, a notable change has been the incorporation of gender provisions within a number of these agreements (Table 1). Of the eight agreements, six include gender provisions in different forms, ranging from references in the preamble, individual articles within chapters, to a dedicated gender chapter.

Table 1: Trade Agreements signed by India in the last 10 years

| S. No. | Agreement | Partner Country/Countries | Gender-Related Provision(s) | Date of Signing |
|--------|--|---|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | India-Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) | Mauritius | × | 22-Feb-21 |
| 2 | India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) | UAE | ✓ | 18-Feb-22 |
| 3 | India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) | Australia | × | 02-Apr-22 |
| 4 | India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) | Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, & Switzerland | ✓ | 10-Mar-24 |
| 5 | India-United Kingdom Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) | UK | ✓ | 24-July-25 |
| 6 | India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) | Oman | ✓ | 18-Dec-25 |
| 7 | India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) | New Zealand | Very Likely (Text awaited) | 22-Dec-25 |
| 8 | India-European Union FTA | European Union | ✓ | 27-Jan-26 |

Source: Trade Agreements Portal, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

2.1 India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)

The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in February 2022 was the first instance where gender references were explicitly mentioned (Table 2). The chapter on MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMEs) included collaboration between the two countries *“on activities to promote SMEs owned by women and youth, as well as start-ups, and promote partnerships among these SMEs and their participation in international trade.”* Further, the two countries committed to establishing a Committee on SME Issues (SME Committee) that, among other things, would *“facilitate the exchange of information on entrepreneurship education and awareness programs for youth and women to promote the entrepreneurial environment”* in their territories.

Table 2: Inclusion of Gender in the India-UAE CEPA

| Agreement | Part/ Title/Chapter | Provision |
|---|---|--|
| India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) | Chapter 13: Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) | Article 13.2 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point (b) Article 13.4 Committee on SME Issues: Point 2 (I) |

Source: Text available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

2.2 India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA)

In March 2024, the India-EFTA TEPA further advanced the inclusion of gender through Chapter 11 on Trade and Sustainable Development. Article 11.3 (2) under the chapter acknowledges the *“importance of incorporating a gender perspective in the promotion of inclusive development and that gender inclusive policies are key elements to enhance the participation of all in the economy and international trade in order to achieve sustainable economic growth.”* Further, Article 11.3 (3) reaffirmed commitment of both sides *“to implement international agreements pertaining to gender equality and non-discrimination, to which they are a party.”*

Table 3: Inclusion of Gender in the India-EFTA TEPA

| Agreement | Part/Title/Chapter | Provision |
|--|---|--|
| India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) | Chapter 11: Trade and Sustainable Development | Article 11.3 Promoting Environmentally Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: Point 2 Article 11.3 Promoting Environmentally Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: Point 3 |

Source: Text available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

This agreement marked an important progression in India’s trade policy approach, as gender was linked not only to inclusive economic development but also more explicitly embedded within the broader trade and sustainability framework of the agreement. At the same time, the provision remained largely declaratory in nature, without introducing dedicated cooperation mechanisms, institutional arrangements, or measurable commitments specifically aimed at enhancing women’s participation in trade.

2.3 India – UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)

The India-UK CETA, signed in July 2025, marked a defining moment with a dedicated chapter on “Trade and Gender Equality”, signalling a clear shift from symbolic recognition to structured engagement on the issue. Moreover, in this trade agreement, gender commitments are not confined to the standalone chapter or sustainability language; instead, they are woven across the agreement.

Table 4: Inclusion of Gender in the India-UK CETA

| Agreement | Part/ Title/Chapter | Provision |
|--|--|---|
| India – UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) | Preamble | SEEKING to increase women’s access to and ability to fully benefit from the opportunities created by this Agreement, including with respect to women from rural areas, marginalised communities, and economically vulnerable backgrounds. |
| | Chapter 7: Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) | Article 7.5 Standards, Guides, and Recommendations: Point 8 |
| | Chapter 9: Financial Services | Article 9.20 Cooperation and Exchange of Views on Financial Services: Point 4 |
| | Chapter 12: Digital Trade | Article 12.18 Digital Inclusion: Point 2, 3, and 5 (c) |
| | Chapter 14: Innovation | Article 14.4 The Innovation Working Group: Point 2 (a) |
| | Chapter 15: Government Procurement | Article 15.21 Working Group on Government Procurement: Point 2 (e) |
| | Chapter 19: Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises | Article 19.4 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point 2 (d) |
| | Chapter 20: Labour | Article 20.6 Non-Discrimination and Gender Equality in the Workplace: Points 1 and 2 Article 20.9 Cooperative Activities |
| | Chapter 22: Trade and Development Cooperation | Article 22.2 Joint Development Cooperation Activities: Point 1 (b) |
| | Chapter 23: Trade and Gender Equality | Article 23.1 Objectives Article 23.2 General Commitments Article 23.3: Cooperation Activities Article 23.4 Trade and Gender Equality Working Group |

Source: Text available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

The agreement begins with a strong commitment in the preamble seeking *“to increase women’s access to and ability to fully benefit from the opportunities created by this Agreement, including with respect to women from rural areas, marginalised communities, and economically vulnerable backgrounds”*.

The purpose of the chapter on Trade and Gender Equality (Chapter 23) is *“to enhance opportunities in both countries for women, including workers, business owners and entrepreneurs, to participate equitably in global, regional, and domestic economies.”* The chapter elevates gender and trade and investment to a distinct area of cooperation within the overall architecture of the agreement, with India and the UK agreeing *“to advance women’s economic empowerment and gender equality across this Agreement”* and *“to incorporate a gender perspective in the Parties’ trade and investment relationship.”*

Article 23.2 includes general commitments such as support for Sustainable Development Goal 5; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the need to develop evidence-based interventions to address the systemic barriers that exist for women in international trade.

Article 23.3 gives operational depth to the chapter through an extensive cooperation agenda aimed at improving women’s market access; strengthening leadership and business networks; promoting financial inclusion and trade finance; enhancing the competitiveness of women-owned enterprises; expanding women’s participation in emerging sectors such as STEM, innovation, and digital trade; and improving the availability of sex-disaggregated data and gender-based trade analysis.

Importantly, Article 23.4 establishes a dedicated Trade and Gender Equality Working Group composed of government representatives from both countries. The Working Group is mandated to oversee implementation, determine cooperation priorities, engage relevant stakeholders, coordinate with other institutional bodies under the agreement, and monitor gender-related provisions across chapters, thereby creating a formal mechanism for sustained policy dialogue and interventions on trade and gender.

Further, the agreement integrates gender considerations across several core chapters—including (Chapter 7), Financial Services (Chapter 9), Digital Trade (Chapter 12), Innovation (Chapter 14), Government Procurement (Chapter 15), SMEs (Chapter 19), Labour (Chapter 20), and Development Cooperation (Chapter 22).

- Under Technical Barriers to Trade (Chapter 7), the agreement encourages national standards bodies *“to make their standards and standard-setting processes gender-responsive”*.
- In the Financial Services chapter (Chapter 9), the endeavour is to share best practices to promote diversity (including gender) in financial services.

- The Chapter on Digital Trade (Chapter 12) places emphasis on digital inclusion and *participation of women and other groups and individuals that disproportionately face barriers to digital trade*. Areas of cooperation include: identifying and addressing barriers in accessing digital trade opportunities; sharing experiences and best practices for developing datasets, and conducting gender-focused analysis in relation to digital trade policies, including by developing methods for monitoring women’s participation in digital trade; and improving digital skills and access to online business tools.
- Chapter 14 on Innovation introduces a forward-looking provision by requiring the Innovation Working Group to consider the potential implications of cooperation activities for gender equality and women’s participation in innovation ecosystems.
- The Government Procurement chapter (Chapter 15) represents a significant advance with the Working Group on Government Procurement to address *“facilitation of participation by women in government procurement to the extent possible”*. As noted by the Export-Import Bank of India,⁵ this opens space for targeted measures to enable women-led enterprises to access government procurement opportunities arising from the agreement and remain competitive amid rising international competition in domestic procurement markets.
- The chapter on Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (Chapter 19), the cooperation agenda includes *“promoting the participation in international trade of SMEs owned or led by under-represented groups, including women”*.
- The Labour chapter (Chapter 20) acknowledges *“the importance of promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination in employment and occupation for sustainable, equitable, and inclusive growth”*. Cooperation areas include improving women’s access to decent work, skill development, and promotion of labour practices that facilitate the integration, retention, and progression of women in the job market.
- Chapter 22 on Trade and Development Cooperation provides for mutually agreed joint activities and projects on issues such as trade and gender equality, among others.

While the India-UK CETA represents a significant step towards integrating gender considerations into trade policy, several important missed opportunities remain. Most notably, the Agreement does not include trade facilitation measures explicitly targeted at women or women-owned enterprises, despite well-documented evidence that women face disproportionate barriers in navigating customs procedures, regulatory compliance, and documentation requirements.⁶ Institutionally, the Agreement falls short by not mandating the inclusion of women in the Trade and Gender Equality Working Group, leaving open the possibility that gender-related trade initiatives may be shaped without women’s representation. There is also a lack of clarity on the specific mechanisms and steps the

⁵ Sangeetha, G. (2026, March 26). India Should Include Gender Provisions in Trade Agreements: EXIM Bank. Deccan Chronicle. Retrieved from <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/southern-states/tamil-nadu/india-should-include-gender-provisions-in-trade-agreements-exim-bank-1877750>

⁶ Agarwal, P. (2025, July 25). How the UK-India trade deal shapes women’s economic empowerment. ODI Global. Available at <https://odi.org/en/insights/how-the-uk-india-trade-deal-shapes-womens-economic-empowerment/>

Working Group should adopt to effectively translate these provisions into tangible, on-the-ground outcomes.⁷

The CETA also lacks concrete pathways for women-owned SMEs in trade -such as improved access to trade information, networks, procurement opportunities, or tailored financial instruments. Additionally, the Agreement does not define or allocate a dedicated budget for gender-related activities, which could have strengthened implementation by supporting initiatives such as women-led trade missions, capacity-building programmes, research, and access to global value chains.⁸

2.4 India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)

Although signed in the same year as the India-UK CETA, the India-Oman CEPA, signed in December 2025, has a limited single reference to women in the Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises chapter. As in the case of India-UAE CEPA, Chapter 11 of the India-Oman CEPA only makes reference to promoting “SMEs owned by women and youth, as well as start-ups, and promote partnerships among these SMEs and their participation in international trade.” This provides for cooperation to promote SMEs owned by women and youth and their participation in international trade.

Table 5: Inclusion of Gender in the India-Oman CEPA

| Agreement | Part/Title/Chapter | Provision |
|---|---|---|
| India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement | Chapter 11: Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises | Article 11.2 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point (b) |

Source: Text available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

2.5 India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

Although the India–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement was concluded in December 2025, the full text is yet to be released. Meanwhile, Union Minister of Commerce and Industry, Mr Piyush Goyal, has highlighted the India-New Zealand FTA as a landmark achievement, noting it as India’s first women-led FTA, with nearly the entire negotiating team composed of

⁷ Taneja, N., Joshi, S., Rao, S., Upreti, V., & Rath, N. (2025, November). Implementing Gender Provisions in the India-UK CETA and Beyond: A Policy Guide (No. 54). Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Retrieved from https://icrier.org/pdf/pb54_Implementing-gender-provisions-in-India-UK-CETA-and-Beyond.pdf

⁸ Agarwal, P. (2025, July 25). How the UK-India trade deal shapes women’s economic empowerment. ODI Global. Available at <https://odi.org/en/insights/how-the-uk-india-trade-deal-shapes-womens-economic-empowerment/>

women.⁹ Prime Minister Modi’s subsequent endorsement of the Minister’s article signals a growing support for gender mainstreaming in trade policies and negotiations.¹⁰

However, despite this framing and the prominence accorded to women in the negotiation narrative, the gender-related provisions reflected in the publicly available factsheet remain limited in scope. Gains are projected in employment, MSME-led manufacturing, and labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, food processing, and electronics, alongside structured cooperation for MSMEs through information-sharing, export-readiness programmes, and linkages with New Zealand’s SME ecosystem, with stated focus on women- and youth-owned enterprises. Only when the official text of the agreement is made available publicly, there would be clarity on whether gender considerations have been embedded through binding provisions, institutional mechanisms, or systematic integration across core trade issues.

Table 6: Inclusion of Gender in the India-New Zealand FTA

| Agreement | Part, Title, and Chapter | Provision |
|---|--|--|
| India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) | Factsheet: India-New Zealand Conclude Free Trade Agreement | <p>India-New Zealand Principal Outcomes: The Winners -</p> <p>Boosting Jobs, MSME-incubators, and manufacturing in MSME-driven and labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, engineering goods, chemicals, food processing, and electronics. Reduced trade barriers and regulatory certainty will strengthen Indian manufacturing and global value chain integration.</p> <p>Structured cooperation for MSMEs through enhanced access to trade-related information, export readiness programmes, and linkages with New Zealand’s SME ecosystem.</p> <p>It supports collaboration among SME centres and integration into global value chains, with a focus on start-ups and enterprises owned by women and youth.</p> |

Source: Official factsheet and announcements published on the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

⁹ Goyal, P. (2025, December 23). India–New Zealand FTA: A win-win deal. Retrieved from <https://www.piyushgoyal.in/india-new-zealand-fta-a-win-win-deal/>

¹⁰ The Statesman. (2025, December 23). PM Modi highlights Piyush Goyal’s vision on India–New Zealand free trade agreement. Retrieved from <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/pm-modi-highlights-piyush-goyals-vision-on-india-new-zealand-free-trade-agreement-1503529612.html>

2.6 India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

The India-EU FTA, signed in January 2026, incorporates gender provisions only within Chapter 16 on Trade and Sustainable Development. The agreement does not contain a standalone chapter exclusively devoted to trade and gender equality, nor does it integrate gender provisions across other core trade chapters.

Even so, the chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development has a dedicated Article 16.4 on Trade and Gender Equality, indicating strong attention to women and trade. Recognising that *“inclusive trade policies contribute to advancing women's economic empowerment and gender equality, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development”*, the two sides *“agree to promote and enhance gender equality and the empowerment of women in the implementation of the provisions of this Agreement”*.

Further, the aim is *“to strengthen their trade relations and cooperation in ways that provide equal opportunities and treatment for women and men to benefit from the provisions of this Agreement, including in matters of employment and occupation, in accordance with their international commitments”*.

The article also sets out a broad cooperation agenda on trade-related aspects of gender equality, aimed at improving the capacity and conditions for women - including workers, businesswomen, and entrepreneurs - to access and benefit from opportunities created under the agreement. The identified areas of cooperation include:

- a) Exchange of information and best practices on gender-disaggregated data collection and gender-based analysis of trade policies;
- b) Measures to strengthen women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation in international trade, business, and the workplace, including support for women-run MSMEs and agri-businesses;
- c) Support for women-led enterprises, cooperatives, and collectives through improved access to international networks, markets, and value chains;
- d) Promotion of inclusive economic opportunities for women engaged in trade, particularly women with disabilities and those in rural and remote areas;
- e) Expansion of business development services, financial inclusion, education, vocational training, and access to financing instruments such as export finance, venture capital, and microfinance for women-led start-ups and businesses; and
- f) Strengthening women’s engagement in digital trade by addressing the gender digital divide.

Gender considerations are further reinforced through other provisions within the chapter, including Article 16.3 on multilateral labour standards and agreements, which links gender

equality to labour standards and decent work, and Article 16.15 on Cooperation, where cooperation is recognised as a means to strengthen capacities on labour rights, environmental protection, and gender equality.

Table 7: Gender Inclusion in the India-European Union FTA

| Agreement | Part, Title, and Chapter | Provision |
|--------------|---|---|
| India-EU FTA | Chapter 16: Trade and Sustainable Development | Article 16.3 Multilateral labour standards and agreements: Point 9 (b) Article 16.4 Trade and gender equality Article 16.5 Cooperation: Point 2 |

Source: Text available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

Notably, the agreement recognises the importance of monitoring the gender-related effects of implementation, indicating a stronger operational orientation than earlier agreements. However, while the cooperation agenda is detailed, many of the commitments remain framed in facilitative and best-effort language, without clearly defined implementation timelines, dedicated institutional mechanisms specific to gender, or enforceable obligations.

3. Key Takeaways

Institutionalising gender provisions within international trade agreements is a top-down approach to mainstreaming gender in trade, with manifold benefits. Commitments embedded in international trade agreements have strong potential to percolate down to shape domestic reforms, including those aimed at advancing gender equality. They foster targeted bilateral and multilateral cooperation, enhance women’s access to markets, and provide data for action-oriented policymaking. This is especially crucial in the context of growing geopolitical fragmentation and the rising use of tariff barriers, which have increased the vulnerability of women employed in export-oriented sectors. Gender provisions supporting SMEs often directly benefit women entrepreneurs and improve women's access to technology and finance.

In the case of India, however, the inclusion of gender provisions in international trade agreements is a work in progress.

Gender provisions are often assessed based on their location in the trade agreement¹¹ - agreement preamble and objectives; annexes; non-specific articles on related issues such as labour, sustainable development; specific articles on gender; side agreements, which are often focused on related issues such as labour; and stand-alone gender chapters or separate protocols.

¹¹ Kuhlmann, K., & Bahri, A. (2023, May). Gender mainstreaming in trade agreements: ‘A Potemkin Façade’? In Georgetown University Law Centre Research Paper No. Forthcoming, Making Trade Work for Women: Key Learnings from the World Trade Congress on Gender, Forthcoming (September 2023), (2023). Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works (Vol. 2511). Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4452694

In the last 10 years, India has signed 8 trade FTAs, of which 5 have gender provisions, and one text is awaited. The locations of these are quite diverse (Table 8). In both the India-UAE and India-Oman CEPA, gender provisions are located in the Chapter on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. In both the India-EFTA TEPA and the India-EU FTA, these are located in the Chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development. The most substantive agreement is the India-UK FTA, where, besides the dedicated Chapter on Trade and Gender Equality, the gender provisions are in the preamble and also spread across other core trade chapters including chapters on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), Financial Services, Digital Trade, Innovation, Government Procurement, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Labour and Trade and Development Cooperation.

Table 8: Location of Gender Provisions in India’s FTAs in the last 10 years

| Agreement | Part, Chapter | Provision |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| India-UAE CEPA | Chapter 13: Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) | Article 13.2 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point (b) Article 13.4 Committee on SME Issues: Point 2 (I) |
| India-EFTA TEPA | Chapter 11: Trade and Sustainable Development | Article 11.3 Promoting Environmentally Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: Point 2 |
| India-UK CETA | Preamble | Article 11.3 Promoting Environmentally Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: Point 3 |
| | Chapter 7: Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) | Article 7.5 Standards, Guides, and Recommendations: Point 8 |
| | Chapter 9: Financial Services | Article 9.20 Cooperation and Exchange of Views on Financial Services: Point 4 |
| | Chapter 12: Digital Trade | Article 12.18 Digital Inclusion: Point 2, 3, and 5 (c) |
| | Chapter 14: Innovation | Article 14.4 The Innovation Working Group: Point 2 (a) |
| | Chapter 15: Government Procurement | Article 15.21 Working Group on Government Procurement: Point 2 (e) |
| | Chapter 19: Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises | Article 19.4 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point 2 (d) |
| | Chapter 20: Labour | Article 20.6 Non-Discrimination and Gender Equality in the Workplace: Points 1 and 2 Article 20.9 Cooperative Activities |
| | Chapter 22: Trade and Development Cooperation | Article 22.2 Joint Development Cooperation Activities: Point 1 (b) |
| | Chapter 23: Trade and Gender Equality | Article 23.1 Objectives Article 23.2 General Commitments Article 23.3: Cooperation Activities Article 23.4 Trade and Gender Equality Working Group |
| India-Oman CEPA | Chapter 11: Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises | Article 11.2 Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs: Point (b) |
| India-New Zealand FTA | Text Awaited | |
| India-EU FTA | Chapter 16: Trade and Sustainable Development | Article 16.3 Multilateral labour standards and agreements: Point 9 (b) Article 16.4 Trade and gender equality Article 16.5 Cooperation: Point 2 |

Source: Authors’ compilation based on official texts available at the website of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI

With regard to the content, gender provisions can be analysed using the role and function approach¹² that focuses on whether these are aspirational or affirmative (Figure 1). Aspirational narrative largely takes recourse to descriptive language, stressing the importance of addressing gender issues, but does not lead to specific commitments. Affirmative content encompasses functional provisions that create some sort of commitment to take positive cooperative action.

Among the Indian agreements analysed, the provisions in the India-UAE CEPA are affirmative with the inclusion of collaboration between the two countries on activities to promote SMEs owned by women and youth, as well as start-ups and commitment to establish an SME Committee that would facilitate the exchange of information on entrepreneurship education and awareness programs for youth and women in their territories. The India-Oman CEPA also locates the gender provisions in the Chapter on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. However, in this agreement, the SME Committee has no explicit focus on women, making this agreement more aspirational than affirmative.

In both the India-EFTA TEPA and the India-EU FTA, the gender provisions are located in the Chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development. However, in the India-EFTA TEPA, the gender provisions are primarily aspirational, with both sides simply acknowledging the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in the promotion of inclusive development and that gender inclusive policies are key elements to enhance the participation of all in the economy and international trade in order to achieve sustainable economic growth. Further, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to implement international agreements pertaining to gender equality and non-discrimination, to which they are a party.

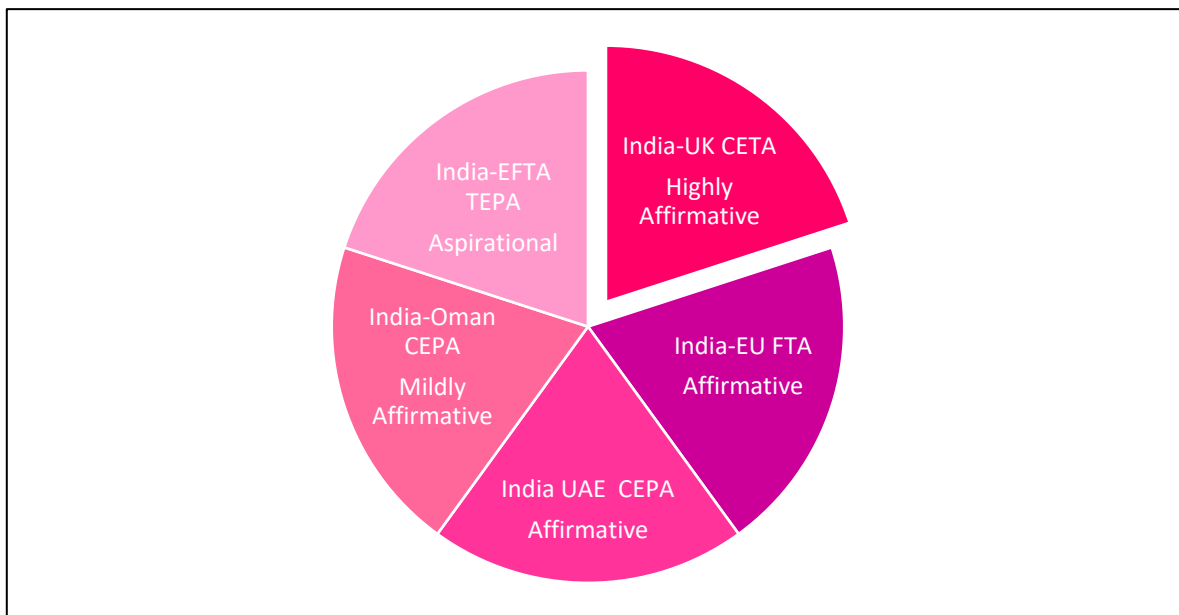
On the other hand, the India-EU FTA is affirmative with the chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development, including the dedicated Article 16.4 on Trade and Gender Equality, under which both sides agree to promote and enhance gender equality and the empowerment of women in the implementation of the provisions of the Agreement. The article also sets out a substantive cooperation agenda on trade-related aspects of gender equality, aimed at improving the capacity and conditions for women - including workers, businesswomen, and entrepreneurs - to access and benefit from opportunities created under the agreement.

The India-UK FTA is, of course, highly affirmative and elevates gender and trade and investment to a distinct area of cooperation within the overall architecture of the agreement. The chapter gives operational depth through an extensive cooperation agenda aimed at improving women's market access; strengthening leadership and business networks; promoting financial inclusion and trade finance; enhancing the competitiveness of women-owned enterprises; expanding women's participation in emerging sectors such as STEM,

¹² Kuhlmann, K., & Bahri, A. (2023, May). Gender mainstreaming in trade agreements: 'A Potemkin Façade'? In Georgetown University Law Centre Research Paper No. Forthcoming, Making Trade Work for Women: Key Learnings from the World Trade Congress on Gender, Forthcoming (September 2023), (2023). Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works (Vol. 2511). Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4452694

innovation, and digital trade; and improving the availability of sex-disaggregated data and gender-based trade analysis. It also establishes a dedicated “Trade and Gender Equality Working Group” mandated to oversee implementation, determine cooperation priorities, engage relevant stakeholders, coordinate with other institutional bodies under the agreement, and monitor gender-related provisions across chapters, thereby creating a formal mechanism for sustained policy dialogue and interventions on trade and gender.

Figure 1: Content Analysis of Gender Inclusion in India’s FTAs



Source: Authors’ illustration

It is pertinent to note that both the more gender affirmative FTAs signed by India, with the UK and EU, are with Western developed countries. Therefore, it is highly likely that the push for this has been from the other parties, with an already demonstrated record of focus on women in trade agreements.

For example, the UK has successfully negotiated Trade and Gender Equality Chapters in its FTAs with Australia and New Zealand, a Women’s Economic Empowerment in Trade Chapter in the UK-Japan CEPA, and the UK-Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein (UK-EEA) FTA includes a Sustainable Development Chapter including Articles on Women’s Economic Empowerment and Trade, prior to the Gender and Trade Chapter in the India-UK CETA. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) requires the EU to promote gender equality in all actions, including external trade. Under the current EU Commission, there has been a shift towards more explicit inclusion of gender in EU trade policy and trade agreements, and the EU Parliament is pushing for all trade agreements to include dedicated chapters on gender equality and women's empowerment, with binding and enforceable gender provisions and provisions for proper monitoring and compliance.¹³

¹³ European Parliament Research Service (EPRS). (2024, March). Gender mainstreaming in EU trade agreements. European Parliament. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/760388/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)760388_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/760388/EPRS_BRI(2024)760388_EN.pdf)

4. Way Forward

The debate in India on the inclusion of gender in international trade agreements is ongoing. The view that inclusion of non-trade issues, such as gender, “can only create unpleasant surprises for India,” continues to find resonance among experts¹⁴. However, the presumption of misuse should not be a ground against progress.

Gender responsive FTAs mark a “significant policy evolution for India”.¹⁵ More so, this evolution is in the context of the growth in women-led development. By 2030, an estimated 30 million women-owned MSMEs are expected to flourish in India, providing employment to nearly 150 million people.¹⁶ More than 30 million women-led enterprises have been registered on the government Udyam platform as of February 2026,¹⁷ and more than one lakh startups in India have at least one female director or partner.¹⁸ Further, a large number of women are employed in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, and leather, and the government focuses on increasing market access for such sectors in the FTAs.

The way forward, therefore, should be to build on this momentum to provide greater traction for a gender-responsive and inclusive trade regime. Currently, negotiations are on for signing FTAs with the Gulf Cooperation Council, Israel, Peru, Chile, Canada and upgradation of the agreements with ASEAN, Japan and the Republic of Korea. In doing so, India can also be a model for the Global South.

¹⁴ Godbole, S. (2026, January 26). Perils of expansive gender provisions in FTAs. The Hindu Business Line. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/perils-of-expansive-gender-provisions-in-ftas/article70552923.ece>

¹⁵ The New Indian Express. (2025, October 7). First FTA that aims to narrow the gender gap. Retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinion/2025/Oct/07/first-fta-that-aims-to-narrow-the-gender-gap#:~:text=This%20is%20the%20first%20time,opportunities%20arising%20from%20the%20CETA>

¹⁶ Nasscom Foundation (2024, June 14). Investing into women entrepreneurs to strengthen the entrepreneurship landscape of rural India. Retrieved from <https://www.nasscomfoundation.org/blog/women-empowerment/investing-into-women-entrepreneurs-to-strengthen-the-entrepreneurship-landscape-of-rural-india-authored-by-nidhi-bhasin-ceo-nasscom-foundation/>

¹⁷ Investment Guru India. (2026, March 3). Over 3.07 crore women-led enterprises registered on Udyam till Feb 2026: Government. Retrieved from <https://investmentguruindia.com/newsdetail/over-3-07-crore-women-led-enterprises-registered-on-udyam-till-feb-2026-government262328>

¹⁸ DD News. (2026, February 12). Over 11.6 lakh women serve as directors in Indian companies: Govt. Retrieved from <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/over-11-6-lakh-women-serve-as-directors-in-indian-companies-govt/>

Figure 2: Way Forward



1. **Gender inclusive Preamble and Objectives** - The Preamble should unambiguously establish gender equality and economic empowerment of women as a guiding principle of the agreement. Although the preamble and objectives are not legally binding, the value of such signalling underlines the gender inclusive and responsive objectives tenor of the agreement from the and intentions underlying the agreement from the very outset. The India-United Kingdom FTA reflects this approach by referring in the preamble to ‘seeking’ gender equality outcomes. A stronger precedent is provided by the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), whose preamble explicitly ‘reaffirms’ the importance of promoting gender equality.
2. **Dedicated, standalone trade and gender chapter** - While a standalone chapter is not sufficient on its own, it can provide visibility, coherence, and institutional focus for gender-responsive trade policies when combined with mainstreaming across the agreement. Chile has emerged as a leading example in mainstreaming standalone trade and gender chapters across its FTAs, including with Uruguay (2016), Canada (modernised

2017), Argentina (2017), and the EU (2023). Similar approaches have also been adopted in agreements such as the UK–Japan CEPA (2020), the UK-Australia FTA (2021), and the EU-Mexico FTA (2025).

3. *Mainstream gender provisions across the FTA* - India's agreements must acknowledge that gender equality and women's economic empowerment through trade are not peripheral concerns but prerequisites for sustainable development and economic growth. For this, gender responsiveness needs to be integrated across core trade chapters - including trade facilitation, services, digital trade, SMEs, and government procurement. For example, since government procurement represents a significant market for businesswomen, it would be useful to explore targets for participation of women-owned enterprises in the bidding process. Another example is the incentivization of supplier diversity initiatives. Also, with regard to development cooperation, future agreements should move beyond being aspirational to include clear, time-bound cooperation activities and indicative targets. Capacity-building and joint skill development programmes, particularly with regard to digital skills, to strengthen the competitiveness of women-owned enterprises and women-led SMEs to link up with local, regional, and global value chains, should be initiated along with specific initiatives to enhance access of women to STEM and ICT educational opportunities.

4. *Integrate Ex-Ante Evaluation and Gender Impact Assessment* - India should incorporate ex-ante gender impact assessments during trade negotiations to enable the integration of gender-responsive provisions aimed at achieving specific gender-related outcomes. Such evidence-based policymaking would support the identification of sectors where trade liberalisation may yield differential impacts across gender lines.

For example, Canada employs the Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework to assess the potential gendered impacts of its trade agreements. In its World Trade Organisation Trade Policy Review, Canada noted that the Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework was applied for the first time in 2018, assessing the potential impacts of the Canada-MERCOSUR Free Trade Agreement negotiations. GBA+ is an analytical tool used by the Government of Canada to examine how trade agreements may affect diverse groups across society, including women, men, and non-binary people.¹⁹ In the context of the Canada-MERCOSUR negotiations, it has helped identify potential distributional effects and informed the inclusion of gender-responsive and inclusive trade provisions, as well as related domestic policy responses where necessary.

Similarly, the European Union systematically integrates Sustainability Impact Assessments (SIAs) into its trade negotiations for in-depth analysis of the potential economic, social, human rights, and environmental impacts of ongoing trade negotiations. While an

¹⁹ Global Affairs Canada. (2026, February 24). Gender-based analysis plus (GBA+). Government of Canada. <https://international.canada.ca/en/services/business/trade/agreements-negotiations/impact-assessments/sustainable/gba-plus>

assessment is currently ongoing for the European Union-Thailand Free Trade Agreement, SIAs have already been completed for negotiations involving the European Union-India Free Trade Agreement, the European Union-Philippines Free Trade Agreement, the European Union-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement, the European Union-Australia Free Trade Agreement, and the European Union-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement.²⁰

- 5. *Encourage corporate social responsibility*** - Incorporating CSR provisions within the FTA to encourage public and private enterprises to have gender-responsive internal regulations, such as reserved representation on corporate boards, anti-harassment procedures at workplaces, flexible work arrangements, protection of maternity rights, and child-care facilities, further enhance gender-inclusivity. In the Canada-Israel agreement, for example, the parties seek to encourage their businesses to use corporate social responsibility to address issues including labour, environment and gender equality.

- 6. *Institutionalise Trade and Gender Working Group for Effective Implementation*** -Building on the precedent of the Trade and Gender Equality Working Group in the India-UK CETA, future Indian FTAs should also institutionalise dedicated trade and gender working groups with clearly defined mandates and operational frameworks. To support effective implementation, there should be time-bound designation of contact points for each side with clearly specified roles and responsibilities to facilitate coordination, communication, and accountability. Working groups should also operate under defined reporting timelines, ensuring regular monitoring, review, and stocktaking of cooperation activities rather than ad hoc reporting. In addition, the trade and gender equality working group should adopt a clear work plan at the outset, outlining priorities, activities, institutional roles, resource requirements, and monitoring arrangements. Structured cooperation modalities - such as capacity-building initiatives, policy dialogues, and knowledge-exchange platforms - should be built into the working group's mandate to support implementation and awareness.

- 7. *Gender-Responsive Outreach*** - To ensure that gender commitments effectively translate into tangible outcomes, stakeholder engagement with women entrepreneurs and related associations should be an integral part of the mandate of the gender and trade working group. A gender lens should be embedded across outreach initiatives and create awareness of the utilisation pathways in the FTA among the women stakeholders to ensure gender positive distributional benefits, as well as allowing feedback on overall implementation. In addition, the development of dedicated digital trade platforms or e-commerce interfaces for B2B collaboration among women-owned/led SMEs to enhance commercial uptake.

²⁰ European Commission. (n.d.). Sustainability impact assessments. Retrieved from https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/analysis-and-assessment/sustainability-impact-assessments_en

- 8. *Dispute Resolution*** – There is no doubt that gender provisions within the ambit of dispute settlement remain highly contentious in the public discourse in India. However, while maintaining the exclusion of legally binding obligations or enforceable consequences, it remains essential to establish a clear and methodical process within the trade and gender working group for addressing potential disputes. This would strengthen both compliance and the credibility of gender-related commitments. For instance, the EU-Chile FTA, while excluding the gender related provisions from the procedures of the general dispute settlement chapter, sets out dedicated articles for addressing such matters through consultations and, where necessary, through the establishment of a panel of experts. Similarly, the Chile-Ecuador FTA also excludes gender-related provisions from recourse to the dispute settlement mechanism; however, it embeds a trade and gender consultation framework within its trade and gender equality chapter. It ensures resolution by initiating coordination through designated contact points via written requests, engaging in consultations and independent expert advice, using practices such as good offices or conciliation, and escalating unresolved matters to relevant ministers or a panel of experts, while clearly specifying time frames for each stage.
- 9. *Support collection of sex disaggregated data and research towards greater trade facilitation*** - The collection of sex disaggregated trade participation and performance of women-owned/led enterprises to make the gender provisions in the FTAs more effective and dynamic. Support for this in the FTA can advance such efforts within India, where, by and large, this has remained limited. Further, collaborative research activities should be supported and possibly funded as areas of cooperation.
- 10. *Strongly consider joining multilateral platforms for gender-responsive trade policy*** - With the global discourse significantly veering towards inclusiveness in trade and sustainability, a self-confident India should embrace a more flexible and pragmatic approach towards other multilateral platforms, such as the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender at the WTO. Additionally, platforms such as The Global Trade and Gender Arrangement (GTAGA) could also serve to deepen India's engagement on this front.

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