

Women Traders in the Borders of North-East India

Background

Women's empowerment is an inevitable part of economic development discourse of any state and for the better growth of North Eastern states of India, women participation in trade activities is utmost important. Women's position in North-East India has not been strong enough because of various socio-cultural and economic factors, and it is essential to strengthen them through capacity building and awareness generation programmes. Women traders in North-East India are very limited and are usually small and informal traders, therefore, educating them towards better trading opportunities and building up their capacity, is necessary.

Mostly women in the North-East India are involved in border trading activities such as selling goods in local bazaars, informal cross-border trade, and transshipment of goods from one vehicle to another as a labourer. Women's inclination to participate in border trade can be seen through their active participation in border haats between Bangladesh and India. These are local markets with "free trade" of goods between the two villages of the neighbouring countries. For women at the grassroots, the path to becoming an entrepreneur is filled with difficulties. Even financial institutions are reluctant to fund women in new ventures. Women face tremendous difficulty in getting timely and adequate finance. Therefore, empowering women workers or small women entrepreneurs in North-East India is an essential for holistic development.

The North-East region of India shares land borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. Both formal and informal trade through land borders is significant through these borders and border trade is an engine for growth and development of the area. The Government of India has begun to place emphasis on developing North-East India as trade hub and is working on developing appropriate physical and non-physical infrastructure for trade, through various initiatives, connecting India with

its neighbours, via North-East India, thus rendering a great opportunity for North-East women to participate in these initiatives.

Empowerment of women will require multi-layered efforts from all areas, so as to bring about greater participation by them in entrepreneurial activities. Possible interventions would include better educational facilities, access to financial schemes and training modules on technical and management skills and professional competence.

Situation of North-East India from the perspective of development and growth of the region is not ideal, but evolving, and it is right time to take advantage of the changing society in order to empower women. Therefore, CUTS has undertaken this project, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, which aims to facilitate awareness generation programmes among women stakeholders about the prospects of trade and build their capacity to participate largely in cross-border trade.

Objectives

The objective of the project is to

1. To understand the participation and engagement of women with trade along North East India's borders with other Asian countries;
2. To understand the opportunities, prospects and capacity needs to enhance participation by women traders on trading opportunities

Approach

Despite schemes to promote women's business such as credit schemes, women are unable to avail the benefits. Gender-neutral or women-positive programs have ended up without impact on women's



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entrepreneurial progress. Women find it difficult to obtain market-related information, often relying on the male members of the family for information. Various social and economic constraints, lack of education and trainings, often hamper their progress as a trader. Therefore, **through this project, CUTS aims to facilitate rounds of interactive dialogues among women traders in North East region of India for generating awareness among such women on exploring opportunities and prospects on cross-border trade and building their capacity for greater participation.**

Activities

The project will be majorly conducted through grass-root level activities. As literature on gender issues in North East India, specifically on trade, is sparse, some desk research would be conducted to design questionnaires. The following activities will be conducted over a period of 12 months –

1. Desk research and designing of Questionnaire
2. Key Informant Interviews (Round 1) – Conducting focused consultations and interviews with key informants including academicians, policy makers, experts, government officials, private players, associations and chambers, etc., to identify and understand key issues women traders face while doing cross-border trade in the North-East India. Along with the interviews critical business nodes including capital cities of the North Eastern states will be identified along the international borders in the North-East India and suitable contact persons will be selected, who will support in successfully achieving the objectives of the study. She/he will be responsible for introducing CUTS with the grass-root level women traders.
3. Grass-root Level Workshops (Round 1) will be organised to facilitate interactive sessions with women traders to understand their position of awareness regarding trade facilitation, access to finance, etc. Their knowledge and understanding on accessibility of finance and market

opportunities will be assessed and they will be informed about the possible opportunities that can be explored by them in the domestic and international market. These will be eight one-day workshops which will help in identifying information gaps. Information collected through these workshops will be documented and will be presented to the state and central governments.

4. Key Informant Interviews (Round 2) – These interviews will be mainly conducted in New Delhi, with the government officials working on women issues. Concerns raised by the women groups in the North Eastern states will be discussed with these officials and possible solutions will be sorted. Civil society organisations and think tanks will also be approached for similar discussions.
5. Grass-root Level Workshops (Round 2) will disseminate information on available schemes that are initiated by the government for the welfare of women stakeholders and their development. The possible solutions sorted from the government and other agencies will also be discussed. A monitoring tool will be used to assess the value addition and benefits women stakeholder will gain through these workshops.
6. The entire research finding along with recommendations for the development and growth of women stakeholders in the North-East India will be presented in the form of a “White Paper”. This paper will be presented to the government and relevant policy makers for their consideration, and will be widely disseminated within the CUTS network.

Expected Outcomes

Awareness generation among the women stakeholders about trade facilitation, cross-border trade opportunities and prospects that they can explore.

Creating an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in the region to greatly participate in cross-border formal trade.