CUTS Dossier on Women’s Economic Empowerment through Trade

Women remain among the most marginalised groups within our society. Given the important role that trade can play in advancing an inclusive development agenda, trade-related projects that directly and/or indirectly benefit women undoubtedly have positive impact on our society. This Dossier highlights projects that have been undertaken by CUTS International over the past ten years which have had an impact on the economic empowerment of women.

1. **Sustainable Development in South Asia: Promoting Water, Food & Energy Security**

**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia**

**Key Message:** Policy reforms on issues related to food, water and energy security can have significant positive impact on the livelihoods of women, particularly in the agricultural sector.

South Asia is the second fastest growing economic zone in the world. This, therefore, demands a sustainable approach towards balancing its huge population density and the use of natural resources. This initiative of the Australian government is a portfolio investment approach to address issues of water, food and energy security in South Asia through better regional cooperation; supporting regional networks through policy reforms at various levels; technology transfer; and capacity building programmes, targeting the poorest and the most vulnerable, particularly women and girls.

Emphasis has been laid on the role of women and girls in the existing system of food, water and energy since women and girls are more susceptible to inequalities and scarcities faced in these three basic systems of human sustenance. On the gender aspect, this project takes into consideration the constraints faced in drawing attention to issues of gender equality and social inclusion in policy and regulation setting and implementation processes.

CUTS conducted a scoping study to explore ground realities and issues that fall under the four Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) verticals: energy, water, sustainable agricultural practices, and market linkages in agriculture products by interviewing key stakeholders in the three river basins of South Asia – Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra. The study was designed keeping in mind gender aspects.

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1 **Country Partners:** Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh; SNV, Bhutan; South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment, Nepal; Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan

**Indian Partners:** Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Nidhi, Assam; BASIX, Bihar; Centre for Research in Rural and Development, Chandigarh; CUTS Institute for Regulation & Competition, Delhi; Nand Educational Foundation for Rural Development, Uttar Pradesh; CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre, West Bengal

**Portfolio Partners:** Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research; Common Wealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation; International Centre for Excellence for Water Resource Management; International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development; South Asia Water Initiative
Food, water and energy sector are intertwined and any ramification in this subtle nexus has a severe impact on women. Women play an important role in different sectors. They not only involved in doing the basic household chores but are also major contributors in the agrarian sector, thus any scarcity in the water and energy sectors has direct implications on their financial, physical and social well-being.

It, therefore, becomes imperative to spread awareness among them regarding the effective management of food, water and energy systems, and induce policy interventions that take into consideration the difficulties they face at different levels, and provide solutions to enable access to women.

During the survey, it was found that women spend more labour-hours on farms pre-harvest as compared to their male counterparts. Their role post-harvest is very limited due to poor access to the market. This is due to the lack of education which, in turn, makes them less confident about making financial decisions due to the prevalence of gender discrimination at all levels in society.

Gender discrimination is more prevalent in the rural parts of Bihar where this vulnerable group is directly impacted by scarcity problems in the food, water and energy sector. In Punjab, however, women are actively involved in all farming procedures. These women have done some intermediary schooling and to some extent are aware of on-going government schemes; however the situation is far more different for the female farmers living in the border areas of India and Pakistan. Women are not able to spend enough time on their fields as they are located in no man’s land. Additionally, they tend to fall prey to the claws of fraud intermediaries who sell banned pesticides, give credit at high rates, and buy farmer’s produce at low prices.

The project is expected to provide policy research and advocacy for reforms with various recommendations to governmental organisations at the regional and national level.

2. **Addressing Barriers to Rice Seeds Trade between India and Bangladesh**

*Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

**Key Message:** *Improved awareness of government schemes and the use of more productive farming techniques can aid in increasing the participation of women in rice seeds trade.*

Small farmers in both India and Bangladesh suffer from low agricultural productivity. Increasing productivity is, therefore, one of the major challenges faced by these farmers. Bangladesh imports most of its requirement of hybrid varieties of rice seeds from China rather than India. Similarly, formal trade of seeds of high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice from India to Bangladesh is almost non-existent, despite some ground-level evidence of informal cross-border movement of seeds.

During our group discussions with farmers, it was found that women are highly involved in rice agriculture but the concentration of women is not high as large landowners. Women contribute more as marginal farmers and labourers.

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2 Bangladesh Partner: Unnayan Shamannay

Indian Partners: Bihar Water Development Society, Patna; Indian Grameen Services, Jharkhand; Samrudhi, Odisha; Mukt, West Bengal
Due to targeted interventions of government and non-governmental organisations, these farmers are now aware of the on-going government schemes. The education level of women has improved and their involvement in agriculture has also increased. Odisha and West Bengal had the largest number of women engaged in the sector whereas Jharkhand, Bihar had the least. In Bangladesh, women are not actively involved in agriculture although they are responsible for household activities.

The project, through the production and dissemination of advocacy documents and policy briefs, will conclude with a forward-looking agenda on regulatory matters for enhancing rice seeds trade between India and Bangladesh, including an agenda for cooperation on larger issues of agricultural development in Eastern India and Bangladesh.

3. **India-Bangladesh Trade Potentiality: An Assessment of Trade Facilitation Issues**

   *Kolkata Consulate of the United States of America*

   **Key Message:** Given that women are actively engaged in various economic activities at border haats (informal markets in border areas), which are facilitating border trade between India and Bangladesh, there can be positive economic impact on the livelihood of women from replicating this model in other border areas.

There is a high level of underutilised trade potential between India and Bangladesh. Tariff liberalisation under the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) has not resulted in expected gains due to non-tariff barriers. The overall goal of the study was to frame a policy proposal for improving India-Bangladesh trade through land routes which would, in turn, generate welfare outcomes, such as new market opportunities for small-scale manufacturing and agrarian sectors, especially in border areas.

During our survey, we found that local economies around land custom stations in the western regions of the border between India and Bangladesh mostly depend on trade and allied activities. An increase in border trade would therefore positively impact their living.

Border haats are local markets that are located along the border to facilitate trade between communities living on both sides of the border. A section of the project focussed on border haats along the India-Bangladesh border where locals from both sides of the border set up their shops and exchanged goods. Women are actively involved in these haats and an improvement in bilateral trade relations between India and Bangladesh will also have positive effects on their livelihoods.

The study concluded with a list of recommendations that included the need to establish border haats as well as improve land transportation facilities across the border.
4. Development Dimensions of the National Foreign Trade Policy of India

Department for International Development, UK (India Office)

**Key Message:** Women who are engaged in trade-related activities would be among the main beneficiaries of a national foreign trade policy if it can strike a balance between the achievement of India’s economic objectives and its development needs.

India’s National Foreign Trade Policy (NFTP) is one of the main pillars of India’s approach to trade promotion. It is about streamlining policies for meeting supply-side constraints faced by export-oriented sectors. The overall objective of the project was to enhance the developmental outcomes of India’s NFTP. The project aimed to assess gaps in NFTP’s inclusiveness and its coordination with external trade negotiation, linkages between the trade and investment policy.

During the survey, one of the clusters identified was the Bamboo. Of the 2000 employees who work in the Bamboo cluster, 75 per cent are women and 70 per cent are from other less privileged sections of the society. One of the major barriers these women face is the lack of transportation infrastructure and awareness of government schemes.

The outcome of the project was a list of recommendations that will serve to better inform government negotiators about how to address various gaps with respect to trade in order to help them in reforming trade policies.

5. Trade Consignment Mapping for Better Regional Connectivity in South Asia

The Asia Foundation (India Office)

**Key Message:** Trade facilitation reforms that directly benefit sectors within which women constitute a significant proportion of employees has direct linkages with the enhancement of women’s economic empowerment.

The goal of this project is to contribute to the enhancement of intra-regional trade in South Asia through the achievement of better trade facilitation measures.

During the survey along the SAARC Corridor 3 in Nepal and India, especially in Kakarvitta, Pankhabari and Siliguri, it was found that tea agriculture is prominent in these regions. 60 per cent of employees on these plantations are women and an improvement in trade facilitation will improve the livelihood of the women in these areas.

The outcome of the project is expected to influence unilateral or regional trade facilitation reforms and help generating awareness amongst the relevant policymakers in the context of new transport and transit projects. The results of the study will also help in the identification of possible implementation concerns, *vis-à-vis* the multilateral agreement on Trade Facilitation, which will help SAARC countries in placing their concerns to the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation.

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3 **Project Partners:** Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh; South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment, Nepal; Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan
6. **Mainstreaming International Trade into the National Development Strategy of Bangladesh and India**

*Royal Norwegian Embassy in New Delhi*

**Key Message:** *Mainstreaming trade in development strategies and involving civil societies in their formulation will give women a chance to present their views and influence the policy-making process.*

The project addressed the problem of social exclusion in trade policy-making. This was a pilot project conducted in India and Bangladesh where civil society has played an important role in pro-poor growth. The aim of the project was to mainstream international trade into national development strategies in these countries.

Mainstreaming trade in development strategies and involving civil societies in their formulation will automatically give women a chance to present their views and influence the policy-making process.

The outcome of the project is expected to influence national- and local-level trade policies, and connect CSOs with trade policymakers in government in order to enhance a more coherent civil society voice in the formulation and implementation of national trade policy.

7. **Linkages between Trade, Development & Poverty Reduction**

*Department for International Development, UK and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands*

**Key Message:** *Specific measures to address various constraints, such as lack of support, experience and awareness of various government schemes, could enhance the participation of women in trade-related activities.*

The debate on the linkages between trade, development and poverty has garnered much attention in the past years. The relationship between trade and growth, and trade and poverty is predominantly conceived as an export-led growth resulting strategy, following the theory that sustained export growth is the main engine of economic growth and a key factor for sustained poverty reduction.

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**Project Partners:** Unnayan Shamunnay, Bangladesh; Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, West Bengal, India; Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis; Institute of Economic Affairs, Kenya; South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment, Nepal; Forum for Protection of Public Interest, Nepal; National Institute of WTO and International Trade Laws, Pakistan; Sustainable Development Policy Institute. Pakistan; Southern African Regional Poverty Network, South Africa; Institute for Global Dialogue, South Africa; Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka; Law and Society Trust, Sri Lanka; Economic and Social Research Foundation, Tanzania; Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations, Uganda; Consumer Education Trust of Uganda; Overseas Development Institute, UK; Centre for Development and Integration, Vietnam; CUTS International, Zambia; Organisational Development and Community Management Trust, Zambia.
This project manifested the policy relevance of international trade on poverty reduction and thus helped in articulating policy coherence, in particular between the international trading system and national development strategies. The activities included analyses of stakeholders’ perceptions on linkages between trade, development and poverty reduction, networking with partner organisations, advocacy with policymakers and CSOs and other stakeholders and developmental agencies including donor agencies.

Women have always played an important role in development, and poverty reduction. Trade liberalisation has given opportunities to them as well, to demonstrate their skills and contribute more towards trade. However, due to various constraints including the lack of awareness, experience and support, they are not yet active participants in this sector.

It was found that although trade policies have evolved and become more liberalised, the benefits of liberalisation are yet to fully translate themselves into growth. Various recommendations were listed to overcome the constraints and enhance the positive impacts of trade.

8. Grassroots Reachout & Networking in India on Trade & Economics
Royal Norwegian Embassy in New Delhi and Oxfam Novib, The Netherlands

Key Message: Given the large concentration of women in various sectors, particularly in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, the views of women are a crucial component of a coherent civil society voice on the economic governance of globalisation issues and its effects on the livelihoods of the poor.

The project aimed to raise awareness on globalisation issues, in general, and WTO issues, particularly in India. The project was implemented in eight cities in India.

The first phase of the project gathered people’s perceptions on globalisation and WTO issues, with a special emphasis on the impact of globalisation on agriculture, and textiles and clothing sectors. Given the large concentration of women in these sectors, it was ensured that views of women on these issues were obtained as well. Towards the conclusion of the project, eight CSOs were established with focus on agriculture and textile sector, for the benefit of the poor with a special focus on women.

The second phase of the project was implemented in eight Indian states in partnership with local CSOs working at the grassroots. It focussed on the five major thrust areas under the NFTP, namely: agriculture, handloom and handicraft, leather and leather products, marine products, and gems and jewellery.

The aim of this phase was to foster equity and accountability in the system of governance and human development, and generate a more coherent civil society voice on the economic governance of globalisation issues and its effects on the livelihoods of the poor, particularly women and other marginalised sections of the society.

6 Project Partners: Consumer Guidance Society, Andhra Pradesh; Consumer Rights, Education and Awareness Trust, Karnataka; Samarthan, Maharashtra; Centre for Youth and Social Development, Orissa; CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training, Rajasthan; Citizen consumer and civic Action Group, Tamil Nadu; Network of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, Uttar Pradesh; CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre, West Bengal
The focus of the project on women provided an opportunity for them to actively present their views on trade policies through women-led NGOs and other organisations. A list of recommendations were drawn from the analyses of the project that were used as advocacy tools that can legitimise the advocacy efforts of the project and further strengthen position of women and other marginalised sections of the society.