



Ready4Trade Central Asia

# Crossing borders, breaking barriers: Gender-responsive trade facilitation for women in Central Asia

*'I believe that if women are given a central role in trade, it would be a significant achievement in the development of every country.'*

ITC workshop participant



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- State Revenue Committee of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan
- State Customs Service under the Ministry of Finance of the Kyrgyz Republic
- Customs Service under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan
- State Customs Service of Turkmenistan
- Customs Committee under the Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan

### Women Business Associations

- Association of business women of Kazakhstan
- Council of Businesswomen under the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of Kazakhstan “Atameken”
- Public Association Women’s Forum ‘Kurak’ (the Kyrgyz Republic)
- National Association of Business Women of Tajikistan
- ‘Tadbirkor Ayol’ International Business Women’s Association of Uzbekistan

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# Acronyms

**FTA** – Free Trade Agreement

**ITC** – International Trade Centre

**NTFC** – National Trade Facilitation Committee

**OECD** – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**R4TCA** – Ready4Trade Central Asia

**SDG** – Sustainable Development Goal

**SME** – Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

**STR** – Simplified Trade Regime

**UN Women** – United Nations Organization for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

**WBA** – Women’s Business Association

**WTO** – World Trade Organization



## Executive summary

Using primary data collected from the trainings and surveys conducted by ITC within the framework of the 'Ready4Trade Central Asia' (R4TCA) project, this report investigates the main challenges and pressing concerns for women traders and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Central Asia region. Simultaneously, it sheds light on the legislative and policy changes currently being implemented by Central Asian governments to foster equal economic participation for women in the region. The report concludes by outlining how the Central Asian public and private sectors can work collaboratively towards improving opportunities and mechanisms for women traders and SME owners.

Women involved in international trade confront many challenges both at the border and behind it, such as insufficient access to financing for business growth and lack of information on cross-border trade regulations and procedures. Implementing gender-sensitive trade

facilitation measures can both generate great benefits for women-led businesses and unleash the economic potential of trade openness. This report presents policy recommendations that can help promote a gender-responsive approach to trade facilitation in the region and enhance gender awareness in policymaking.

### Primary challenges confronting women traders in Central Asia

The findings from ITC surveys reveal the specific needs and challenges faced by women traders in Central Asia, which can be grouped into four main areas.

- A great need for gender-disaggregated data collection and improved gender responsiveness in the design of trade facilitation reforms and support programmes at the policymaking level.

- Insufficient access to financial resources emerges as a highly significant constraint for women traders wanting to engage in trade operations and expand businesses into international markets.
- Women traders lack accessible information and knowledge on cross-border trade to support their understanding of rules and requirements.
- A need to build confidence and skills in trade, advocacy and digital solutions for women traders to fully participate in cross-border trade.

## ITC interventions in making borders work for women

ITC has contributed to creating a more conducive border and trade environment for women as well as building women's skills in cross-border trade and in leadership positions in Central Asia.

- Delivering gender-responsive trade facilitation training for over 650 Customs officials across five Central Asian countries, explaining the challenges that women encounter in trade based on survey results, and initiating changes on the ground.
- Cultivating leadership skills for 50 women Customs officials in Uzbekistan through a training programme aimed at promoting gender equality and creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce.
- Fostering confidence and knowledge in more than 350 women across five Central Asian countries by

running workshops on trade facilitation and Customs legislation in cross-border trade.

## Recommendations for empowering women in trade

Based on insights gleaned from interviews, surveys and training outcomes, the following recommendations are made to better support women's participation in cross-border trade and promote a gender-responsive trading environment.

- Increase transparency in trade procedures and implement digital reforms by providing access to information through trade portals and 'one-stop' information desks, introducing simplified trade regimes (STRs) and paperless cross-border trade solutions.
- Incorporate gender-responsive policymaking in trade facilitation reforms and budgeting, strengthening partnerships between Women Business Associations (WBAs) and National Trade Facilitation Committees (NTFCs), and establish gender focal points in public institutions.
- Create a conducive border environment through integrating gender-responsive infrastructure across border posts, improving gender-disaggregated trade data collection and sustaining gender awareness initiatives for government officials.
- Empower women in trade and Customs through capacity building and financial inclusion, advancing regional dialogue and gender mainstreaming.



## CHAPTER 1:

# Gender responsive trade facilitation in Central Asia: overview, challenges and needs

### Context

Firuz is an entrepreneur exporting honey and dried fruits from her country to neighbouring ones through cross-border trade. Ordinarily, she exports small quantities and is dependent on a Customs clearing agent to help get her goods across the border. Although the Customs clearance company's fees are high, Firuz struggles to access relevant information regarding fees and Customs procedures and, as a result, finds it easier to outsource this responsibility to a third party, who also arranges the logistics – via a truck – for her goods.

She started cross-border activities herself and engages in all pricing and negotiations for transportation herself. In recent times, the COVID-19 crisis has increased border clearance times, making her worried about the shelf life and longevity of her products while they are stuck at the border. Although she would like to export her goods to European countries and the Russian Federation, she does not have sufficient volume to do so and requires financial assistance to be able to grow her business.

While her country's laws support gender equality and her equal access to economic opportunities, cultural realities

make it difficult for her to obtain financing from a bank to grow her business. Her husband does not think it is important for her to grow her business because she also has to take care of their children and household chores, as well as care for his ageing mother. Firuza would appreciate more training on Customs procedures and general business skills development but does not know where she can access this kind of training. As a result, she continues to operate as a small enterprise.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the sharp economic disparities across the world and sparked a renewed focus on how easily gender stereotypes can permeate every facet of life when inequalities are heightened or when carefully cultivated conditions to support work-life balance for women are plunged into disarray. Since 2020, the pandemic's economic and social impacts have disproportionately affected women and girls. Women have been faced with juggling impossible demands between work and home. In addition, the prolonged closure of schools increased girls' chances of both teenage pregnancy and dropping out of school altogether, as well as the risk of child marriage. While some of these challenges have eased as the pandemic's economic impact has lessened, gender inequalities remain a pervasive challenge throughout the world.

**Increased household responsibilities and limited time to spend on business and trade activities**

**62%**

**of Central Asian women engage in trade to supplement family income while keeping work time flexible**

From an international trade perspective, women traders and women-owned businesses have also been dealt a cruel blow by the pandemic's economic fallout. Firuza's story is not uncommon for many women traders across the world, nor are the challenges she faces specific to the Central Asian region. The drastic economic impact of the pandemic has highlighted continued gender disparities in all sectors and industries of the global economy, and the inadequacy of some support measures on offer. In the case of informal workers and traders (many of whom are women), support mechanisms have been even less forthcoming, especially as the

benefits and contribution of informal work often goes unrecognized in the formal economy.

## Methodology and objective of the report

The R4TCA project financed by the European Union is part of the broader ITC mandate to support and improve the business competitiveness of SMEs as well as improving the business environment and facilitating better management of border operations through implementing the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement.



**The R4TCA is a regional project across five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – designed to support investment, competitiveness and trade in Central Asia.** While much has been written and researched on trade facilitation issues as they impact women traders and women-owned businesses across Asia, Latin America and Africa, far less attention has been paid to these concerns in Central Asian countries. Through the R4TCA project, ITC attempts to address this deficit by promoting a gendered approach to trade facilitation in Central Asia and enhancing gender awareness in policymaking. Making this a reality has seen the **ITC work with national governments in the region to deliver training related to three key areas:**

1. Raising the awareness of border officials on gender-responsive trade and providing practical recommendations for making trade gender-inclusive
2. Providing training and recommendations to collect gender-disaggregated data for gender-inclusive trade policymaking
3. Building the capacity of women entrepreneurs to increase their confidence in conducting cross-border trade.

The purpose of this report is to tie together the findings from the trainings and surveys to paint a better picture of the challenges and positive developments facing Central Asian countries as they seek to increase their participation and presence in international trade. **Together with ITC, Central Asian governments along with Customs brokers' associations and WBAs have taken many steps towards promoting a more gender-sensitive approach to trade facilitation. This report highlights the main developments in this regard.**



**Using primary data from the surveys conducted by ITC – among the first of their kind for the region – the report identifies the greatest challenges and most pressing concerns for women traders and SME owners in the region. It also identifies legislative and policy changes Central**

## Asian governments are currently implementing to promote women's equal economic participation in the region.

### The survey was designed to identify:

- The types of businesses Central Asian women primarily engage in, the nature of goods and volumes traded, and the modes of transportation used
- Questions around the 'status' of their operations (i.e. formal business registration, tax payments and the like)
- Challenges for cross-border trade in Central Asia, as identified by business associations, government agencies and women traders themselves, including challenges faced at the border and regulatory burdens
- Policies (where possible) that can be improved or implemented to ease the burden of trade facing women cross-border traders.

The report highlights important findings from the surveys and feedback from the various trainings for government officials on the state of women's participation in international trade activities to illuminate both progress made and the challenges facing the five Central Asian countries. It concludes by identifying how the public and private sectors can work together to improve opportunities and mechanisms for women traders and business owners across the Central Asian region.

## Trade facilitation and gender: What is the link?

In recent years, the need for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls have become an

**Women represent 50% of the global working population but only generate 37% of global GDP.**

**There could be \$28 trillion (26%) of additional annual GDP in 2025 if women played an identical role in labour markets to men.**

Source: McKinsey, World Bank, OECD.

## ITC undertook surveys among the following target groups:



**1,500**

women  
traders



**52**

business  
and civil  
society  
organizations



**32**

government  
agencies  
and NTFCs

integral part of policymaking. One of the most relevant areas of intervention is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 5 is focused on achieving gender equality and supporting and empowering women and girls to overcome various barriers to advancing women's rights. SDG 5 and the 2030 Agenda are the latest in a long line of high-level policy commitments that have sought to close the gender gap, promote equality and enable women's economic participation.

Women's inequality is the result of a combination of social, economic, political and cultural factors. Gender mainstreaming attempts to account for and address these inequalities through policymaking. When incorporated into policies and programmes, **gender mainstreaming is a tool for acknowledging the differentiated impacts that policies and programmes can have on men and women alike.** In other words, gender mainstreaming acknowledges that policies are not gender-neutral and is part of an overarching process of **gender responsiveness.** This entails consistent and systemic attention to the differences between men and women with a view to addressing structural constraints to gender equality (Canadian International Development Agency, 2000).

Historically, it was considered that trade was gender-neutral and that trade policies and decisions impact men and women equally. We now know this is not true – in fact, trade policies often have clear and distinct impacts on men and women in very different ways. This is the result of the **gendered division of labour, which translates into gendered economic roles** (von Hagen, 2014). The call for greater inclusion of women-specific considerations in policymaking has grown, as has the use of gender mainstreaming across the world.

The Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment (the Buenos Aires Declaration) was signed by 127 WTO member states and observers at the eleventh

WTO Ministerial Conference in 2017. It reflects a collective effort to remove barriers to and foster women's economic empowerment, acknowledging that trade policies can contribute to enhancing gender equality and women's economic empowerment, and can help reduce poverty (WTO, 2017).

The Buenos Aires Declaration upholds the need to **develop evidence-based policies and to share best practices for conducting gender-based analysis of trade policies; monitoring and evaluation of support programmes targeting women in international trade; procedures for collecting gender-disaggregated data; and analysis of gender-focused statistics related to trade** (Korinek et al., 2021). Implementing such tools will help promote best practices among policymakers and ensure that national trade measures do not further women's economic disadvantages but instead promote their participation in international trade activities. However, trade can only be a strong catalyst for gender equality and women's empowerment if the right measures are in place.

**The benefits of international trade can only be achieved if gender-sensitive trade measures (at policy, institutional and business levels) are properly implemented and rectify the biases against women in the multiple roles they play in the economy.**

For example, international trade can substantially improve economic outcomes for women, increasing employment and wages while creating better jobs and lowering costs. Similarly, policymakers and businesses can ensure that educational and skills development for women, which are key determinants of women's employment outcomes and opportunities, are provided to women employees to ensure that women do not remain trapped in low-paying and low-skilled jobs (von Hagen, 2014). **Trade can either be a catalyst for gender equality or an intensifier of existing gender inequalities.**

Therefore, policymakers should strive to avoid two common shortcomings when using gender analysis and mainstreaming gender in trade-related initiatives:

## The gendered impact of trade is context-specific and multidimensional because women are impacted by trade in their multiple roles as workers, traders, producers, consumers, taxpayers and unpaid household workers

1. **Tacking gender-specific considerations on as an afterthought**, without appropriate integration into the design of policies and support programmes
2. Discussing and assessing gender dimensions during the formulation of an initiative but **failing to include concrete action points in the design, implementation, financing and monitoring frameworks** for the identified intervention (Higgins, 2012).

There are some areas where trade policies can play an important, supportive role for more inclusive outcomes and can help ensure that discriminatory side-effects do not occur. For example, some countries are increasingly making use of **gender-based analyses and gender impact assessments to understand the potential direct and indirect impacts of trade policies or new trade agreements on women**. Canada has chosen to use gender-based analyses when developing trade policy and negotiating trade agreements to identify how policies and free trade agreements (FTAs) could inadvertently compound the disadvantages that women experience (Fitzgerald, 2019). The Chile-Canada FTA, the Chile-Argentina FTA and the Canada-Israel FTA all contain dedicated gender and trade chapters. Similarly, Rwanda has a National Trade Policy that places social development and gender equality as

### Catalyst for gender equality

Trade liberalization associated with rising employment and business opportunities for women

### Intensifier of existing gender inequalities

Gender-insensitive trade policies worsen women's economic and social status and constrain a country's trade expansion and competitiveness

one of its primary focuses and recognizes the need for gender assessment of trade agreements in its policy (Bhattacharya et al., 2018).

## Bringing women into the fold for trade facilitation reforms

While broader benefits from economic participation for women seem obvious, the importance of gender mainstreaming for trade facilitation is equally important. However, it is often underappreciated because of traditional considerations around gender neutrality for infrastructure and borders, which underpins the basic requirements of trade facilitation.

Trade facilitation is a broad term used to encapsulate several processes related to importing and exporting, and encompasses reforms to both hard and soft infrastructure in four focal areas: physical infrastructure; information and communications technology; business environment; and border and transport efficiency (Sakyi et al., 2017). The main objective of trade facilitation is to reduce the time and cost involved in trading across borders.

Trade facilitation operates in three key areas:

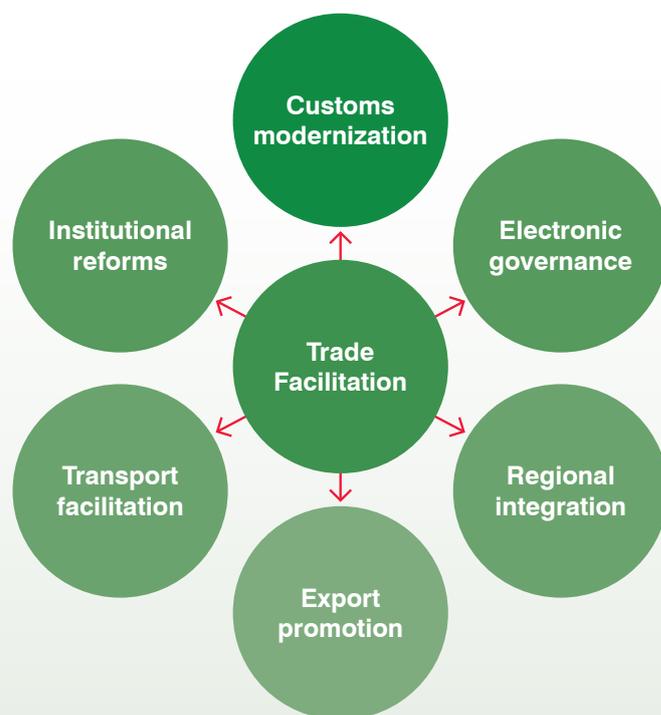
- 1. Simplification:** The number of documents and procedures associated with the clearance of goods is reduced.
- 2. Harmonization:** Customs procedures are improved so that they are compatible with international standards. Typical actions include consultations between national Customs agencies, international exchange of data, and alignment of procedures with international standards.
- 3. Transparency:** Trade costs are minimized if Customs procedures and regulations are transparent and clear in their application across ports of entry, ensuring that enforcement is fair and consistent (Amoako-Tuffour et al., 2016).

**Gender-neutral policies and interventions within the realm of trade facilitation can often disproportionately and negatively affect women traders and women-owned businesses** in the following ways.

1. Neutral implementation of laws that include complex bureaucratic requirements result in unintentional biases against SMEs and, by extension, women-owned businesses.
2. Governments often fail to consider women traders' needs in formulating trade initiatives.
3. A lack of access to technology prevents women traders from fully participating in trading opportunities.



Figure 1: Trade facilitation and broader policy initiatives



4. Lack of information is a major barrier for women-owned SMEs and small-scale traders.
5. Customs officials may lack knowledge of the rules to assist women traders or have biases against them.
6. The absence of automation of trade facilitation requirements exposes women traders to higher levels of abuse and corruption at borders (Singh & Lepillez, 2020).
7. Gender-neutral policies may overlook the importance of ensuring women's representation and meaningful participation in decision-making processes related to trade facilitation, limiting their ability to advocate for specific needs and interests.
8. Lastly, a lack of gender-disaggregated data in trade-related statistics can affect women traders negatively.

**In turn, trade facilitation reforms can be of great benefit to women-led businesses, and specific gender-sensitive interventions when implementing trade facilitation reforms can generate even greater benefits.**

By comparison, the inclusion of gender-specific considerations in the design of both hard infrastructure (such as one-stop border posts) and soft infrastructure (information technology infrastructure, Customs administration and STRs) can greatly assist women who live close to border crossings and who engage in informal cross-border trade, as well as women-owned businesses and small businesses alike. Trade facilitation reforms that reduce fees and charges at the border benefit their bottom line, while improved transparency in regulations on importing and exporting procedures can facilitate access to information for women-owned businesses (Korinek et al., 2021). Likewise, export promotion

agencies can support women entrepreneurs in accessing international markets, increasing their capacity to export by supporting networking activities and providing them with market information to overcome knowledge gaps (Korinek et al., 2021).

For example, STRs are tailored to the specific needs of small-scale traders and provide a twofold benefit: formalizing small-scale trade, which leads to increased revenue for governments through tax collection; and providing Customs procedures to traders, who can plan and budget for cross-border trade activities (United States Agency for International Development, 2018). For much of the world, informal cross-border trade is undertaken by women traders and so STRs, as a policy instrument, are directly beneficial for them. Trade Information Desk officers at border posts are tasked with assisting women traders with border clearance procedures as well as information-sharing for traders and small businesses.

**Improvements to both hard and soft infrastructure (improved lighting, sanitation facilities + accommodation, and quicker clearance lanes) at border crossings can be made in a gender-sensitive way that increases women's participation in border economies and makes their daily lives simpler and safer.**

## TF REFORMS INCREASES PROPENSITY OF WOMEN TO TRADE

Reduces the costs of trade and shelters women from potential harassment and discrimination through automation



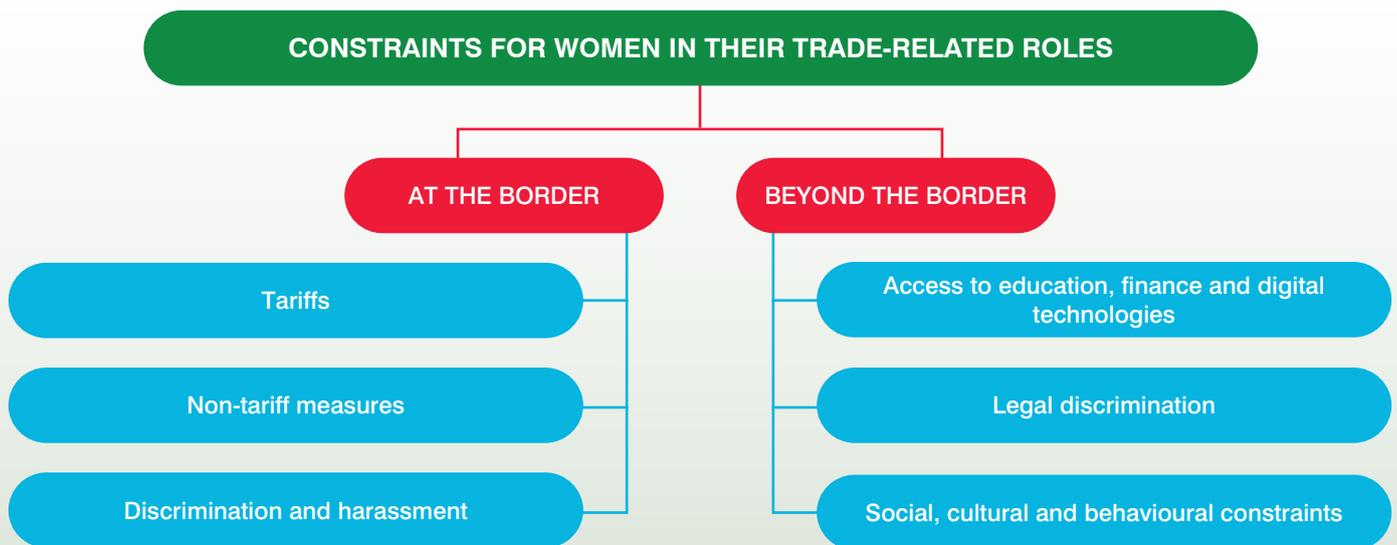
Reduces time to trade and provides time to women for household responsibilities

Benefits smaller women-owned firms who often lack the resources to access relevant trade information



Provides transparency that benefits women businesses, especially those with fewer professional networks

Figure 2: Constraints affecting women in trade



Source: World Bank Group & WTO (2020).

Nevertheless, while aggregate benefits from trade can be positive, there are still localized costs that can negatively affect women depending on their roles in the economy, their skills, their location / place of work, and the sectors that they work in. Women face a combination of at-the-border and behind-the-border barriers when engaging in international trade activities (see Figure 2).

In the context of trade facilitation, women traders often tend to be concentrated in the informal sector or operating SMEs owing to greater household responsibilities than men and limited time to dedicate to business activities. At the same time, women often suffer from insufficient access to financing to grow their enterprises, and a lack of information and knowledge about cross-border trade regulations and procedures. **If trade liberalization measures are implemented without accounting for existing gendered economic roles and division of labour, they can inflict great harm by deepening disadvantages for women, while simultaneously limiting the economic potential of trade openness** (von Hagen, 2014).

All of this goes to show that **gender awareness is critical across all facets of international trade**, from trade facilitation reforms to the design of export support programmes, to examining how industries can become more gender-aware in their design and business opportunities. Equally critical is collection of gender-disaggregated data for both the public and the private sector. All the above are necessary measures towards enhancing and facilitating women's participation in international trade.

The next section provides an overview of the gender context in each Central Asian country and their efforts

towards improving gender parity and cross-border trade management, as well as enhancing women's participation in the economy.

## Gender contexts across Central Asia – realities facing women

Central Asia is a heterogeneous region, characterized by very different economies: exporters of natural resources Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, relatively industrialized Uzbekistan, agricultural-based Kyrgyzstan, and mining- and agriculture-focused Tajikistan (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2018).

This report does not intend to provide in-depth analysis on the gender contexts in each country. It will, however, highlight economic and social similarities and differences across the five countries of focus and provide a snapshot of the socioeconomic realities facing women in each country, which will help shed light on why women continue to face trade-specific challenges within the region.

Across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, constitutional provisions guarantee the equality of men and women. The former three countries also have separate gender equality laws and policies or national plans as part of their commitments to the SDGs (Singh & Lepillez, 2020).

Uzbekistan's Action Strategy for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2017–2021 (Muratalieva, 2022) emphasized the social sphere, supporting increased political and public involvement of women along with

specialized social policies. This Strategy paved the way for the subsequent roadmap, the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 (Official website of the President of Uzbekistan, 2022), which came into effect on 29 January 2022. Presently, efforts are under way to enhance societal well-being through entrepreneurial ventures. Active engagement with the population enables assistant *khokims* (governors) to identify potential entrepreneurs and offer guidance. The government, in turn, provides support and resources for those embarking on their entrepreneurial journeys.

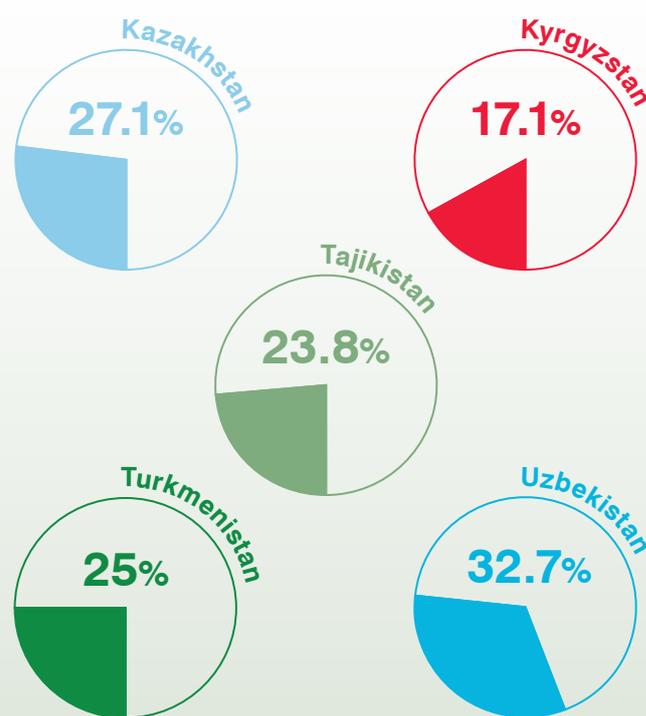
Similarly, the Kazakh Government promotes gender equality within the domestic space through the 2030 Concept of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which ensures equality between spouses and shared parental responsibilities towards children (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019a). In Kyrgyzstan, gender equality is entrenched in the Constitution and has been supported by the National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2022–2024. The Kyrgyz Republic approved the National Strategy on Achieving Gender Equality until 2030 (Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Justice, 2022b) and the National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2022–2024 (Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Justice, 2022a) on 16 September 2022. The new strategy and action plan place significant emphasis on enhancing women’s economic stability. Priority tasks in this regard include increasing women’s labour-force participation, promoting women’s entrepreneurship, ensuring decent working conditions, improving women’s legal and financial literacy, and integrating gender perspectives into climate change adaptation policies.

According to an official press release, Turkmenistan’s government has endorsed the National Action Plan for Gender Equality spanning 2021 to 2025. This plan was devised collaboratively with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund. The updated strategy is attuned to the socioeconomic repercussions of the worldwide pandemic on women and girls, and it delineates strategies to guarantee inclusivity, particularly for young girls and women with disabilities (United Nations Turkmenistan, 2021).

Nevertheless, gender stereotypes persist in areas related to family life, employment opportunities and education, despite constitutional provisions that entrench gender equality. While these countries have policies dedicated to elevating women’s participation in social and public life, these policies do not necessarily cover economic development for women and entrepreneurship, a challenge for policy formulation shared among Central Asian countries.

Despite the presence of gender mainstreaming mechanisms (such as women’s affairs committees or departments), many of these units are focused on service provision rather than decision-making at a policy level, and therefore are unable to meaningfully influence policy

**Figure 3: Political representation of women in Central Asian parliaments as at February 2021**



Source: <https://data.unwomen.org/>

development or successfully address gender inequality holistically (Singh & Lepillez, 2020).

Another challenge is implementation mechanisms, such as gender-responsive budgeting, for gender equality initiatives – a challenge facing Kyrgyzstan (United Nations Inter-agency MAPS Mission Team, 2019). Across Central Asia, the lower levels of women’s participation in politics and as political decision makers means it is tougher to strive for (and implement) gender-based reforms that challenge cultural norms (see Figure 3).

**While countries may make constitutional provisions for equality before the law for men and women alike, societal practices need to change as well. Challenges in this regard are not unique to Central Asia, and overcoming societal stereotypes and discrimination against women is a global issue.**

Discriminatory practices that subordinate women’s roles within the family, thereby limiting their education and employment opportunities outside of the household, continue to exist (OECD, 2019f).

In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, many women face little recourse to their property rights post-divorce or in terms of general inheritance (OECD, 2019c, e & f). In some cases (Tajikistan), marital property rights are often not respected in post-divorce scenarios or with

regards to inheritance (OECD, 2019c). In comparison, in Kazakhstan, there are no public reports of discriminatory practices towards women in relation to inheritance of property and land (OECD, 2019b) but gender stereotypes about the economic roles of men and women – and men as the family head and breadwinner – persist (Grieg et al., 2019). Challenges such as bridal kidnapping, patriarchal-dominated inheritance practices and domestic violence are largely viewed as issues of the household and continue to exist despite legislative provisions to the contrary (OECD, 2019f & c).

These ramifications are not limited to the household and domestic affairs alone. **Unequal levels of economic participation and restrictions on the type of work and sectors within which women can work is common.** Across the region, women are underrepresented in the workforce and as business owners, and earn less income than their male counterparts.

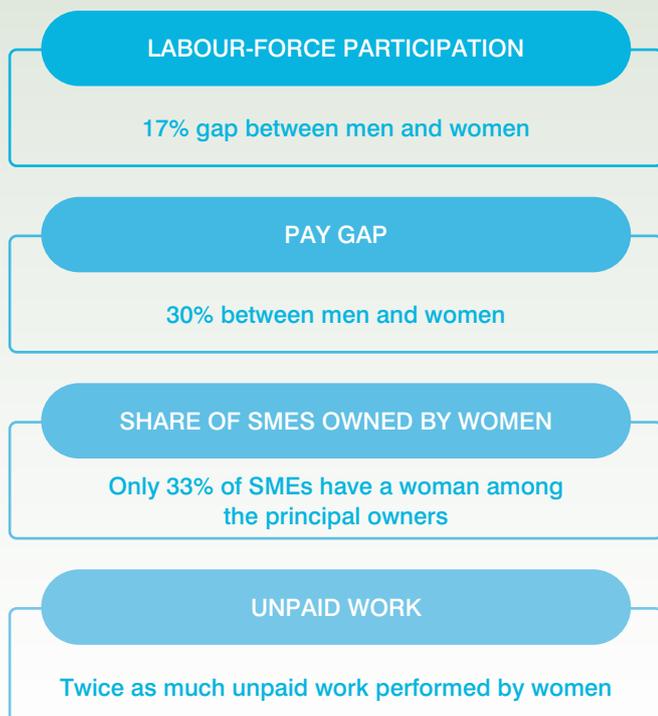


**Only one-third of women in Central Asia are entrepreneurs, while their remuneration rate is also 30% less than their male peers**

(Chernyshevskaja et al., n.d.).

For example, in Kyrgyzstan, assets and property are more often registered in the name of men (for example, only 29% of real estate is registered in the name of

**Figure 4: Constraints on women's participation in the economy**



Source: UN Women, World Bank Statistics.

**While a focus on improved political and social participation is important, enabling and guaranteeing economic participation for women across Central Asia is equally important and can play an important role in changing entrenched societal norms regarding gendered roles in society between men and women.**

women (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2016)), which means that women have limited access to loans. The main source of lending for women's entrepreneurship is microfinance organizations, where it is easier to apply for and receive a loan, but the loans are for lower amounts and higher interest rates. Only 30% of women are engaged in entrepreneurship, compared with 70% of men. Some 90% of women's capital is concentrated in the field of micro and small business, where there are high risks of capital loss (United Nations Organization for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), 2022).

While not unique to Central Asia, gender gaps persist in formal employment participation rates and wages. Like many other parts of the world, gender inequalities in the labour market exist across Central Asia (see Figure 4).

However, **Kazakhstan bucks this trend: it has the highest rate across the region of women's participation in the labour force – at 66% – and women are increasingly active business owners, with over 40% of SMEs led by women business owners** (Grieg et al., 2019).

For the other countries, however, women's economic participation is less positive. In Turkmenistan, women's participation in the labour force is significantly lower than men's – 41.9% compared with 78.2% (2017 data), which is the largest gender gap in labour-force participation within the region (Holzhacker & Skakova, 2019). According to data from 2018, Kyrgyz women's participation in the labour force is only 56% compared with 80% for men (United Nations Development Programme Kyrgyzstan, 2018). Between 2003 and 2013, women's rate of participation in the labour force in Tajikistan declined from 46% to 27%; their ability to participate in the economy was hindered as a result of child-rearing duties, the high prevalence of increased remittances and fewer employment opportunities (World Bank Group, 2018).



Moving beyond survivalist businesses is also hindered by care responsibilities that consume many hours of the day. The rate of time spent on unpaid labour (i.e. household work) is very high across the region, detracting from time that could be spent in the formal economy and/or growing their businesses. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, women can spend up to 4.5 hours a day fulfilling household chores (Asian Development Bank, 2019), whereas Tajik women spend up to four hours a day on household activities.<sup>1</sup>

ITC DATA SHOWS THAT...

**29%**

of women admit trading informally

**57%**

of these women have fewer than 10 employees in the company

Care work and economic constraints coupled with the absence of social protection networks (such as affordable childcare options) has relegated women's economic participation to specific industries (United States Agency for International Development, 2019). These industries include public sectors such as health care, services and education, which offer better flexibility but lower salaries (OECD, 2019a).

Gender-based gaps in sectors are also rooted in segregationist education policies that deem some occupations to be 'suitable' for women and others

1. Programme to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022–2026.

ITC DATA SHOWS THAT...

**90%**

of women perform household responsibilities alongside business / trade activity

**62%**

of women engage in trade to supplement family income while keeping working time flexible

**Customary law + gender stereotypes are listed by women traders as the #1 societal reason why they cannot expand their businesses internationally.**

– construction and mining, for example – to be unsuitable for women's participation. Through their various Labour Codes, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan restrict women's ability to access the labour market by excluding their participation in certain industries owing to their perceived lack of suitability on the basis of traditional gender roles and/or restrictions in terms of night work and working overtime (OECD, 2019c, e & f). In Kyrgyzstan, Labour Code article 218 (Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Justice, 2004) specifically provides for a government-approved list that details activities identified as 'hard work' and 'work under dangerous conditions' (Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Justice, 2015), for which it is forbidden to use the labour of women and persons under 18 years old (OECD, 2019c).



## ITC DATA SHOWS THAT...

Women traders typically operate as micro-enterprises (employing 10 or fewer persons) or as sole traders

48%

trade formally

34%

manage informal business operations + trade informally

In line with this, article 242 of Turkmenistan's Labour Code (International Labour Organization, 2023b) and article 216 of Tajikistan's Labour Code (International Labour Organization, 2023a) similarly establish government-sanctioned inventories enumerating tasks classified as 'arduous labour' or 'hazardous work.' These regulations effectively bar the employment of women and individuals under the age of 18 in such capacities. **Often these restrictions translate into low participation of women in the workplace, vertical and horizontal segregation in the labour market, and gender-based wage gaps** (OECD, 2019d).

**Luckily, change is on the way.** Similar restrictions used to exist in Kazakhstan but the government has since removed restrictions on employment for women. The Labour Code – which previously barred women from employment in the construction, transportation and metals industries – was revised to open up jobs for women in the transport, construction and chemical industries (Grieg et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, since May 2019, Uzbekistan has lifted its ban on female labour participation in specific industries and professions, instead providing for the creation of a recommended list of industries or professions that may adversely affect women's health (LexUZ On-line, 2019).

For women who choose to participate in cross-border and international trade activities, the challenges are a double whammy of overcoming gender-specific challenges around business growth and operations, while also dealing with unfriendly business practices and requirements at the border.

## The needs and challenges of women cross-border traders in Central Asia

Since 2020, ITC has worked with Central Asian governments, WBAs and Customs brokers' associations to conduct interviews and extensive surveys to better understand the challenges that women face when engaging in cross-border trade activities, and the perspective of these stakeholders in this regard. Findings from ITC surveys conducted across the region show that many women traders experience challenges that

governments would do well both to heed and to implement measures for their improvement. It should be noted that the findings are a snapshot from a medium-sized group of interviewees. Nevertheless, the survey findings not only provide a more accurate reflection of on-the-ground realities for these women but are also an important source of data that can support evidence-based policymaking throughout the region.



**More than 1,500 women traders were surveyed, which helps to create a general profile of women traders.**<sup>3</sup> The survey reveals

that most women (70% of survey participants) reside in urban areas, are married or divorced, and engage in small-scale cross-border trade. Interestingly, the largest age group participating in cross-border trade is 45 years or older (39% of participants); 81% of them own smartphones (with daily internet access ranking at 71%) and, intriguingly, 58% of them have tertiary education – demographics that differ starkly from their African peers, for example.

Across Central Asia, many women traders are business owners themselves (49% of survey participants)<sup>4</sup> and/or are self-employed, and many (53% of those surveyed) make use of Customs companies and brokers to assist in the completion of paperwork. They are generally engaged in the trade of agricultural produce, cottage industry products and clothing / textiles, mostly with neighbouring countries (the Russian Federation, Türkiye and Uzbekistan ranking as the top three export partners),<sup>5</sup> although there is interest to expand operations into Europe, with the correct support.

Across the region, some general observations around Customs processes and trade facilitation include:

- Obstacles related to infrastructure support at border crossings associated with trade facilitation hinder regional integration and obstruct Central Asian countries' participation in international trade.
- Customs processes are often gender-neutral, and a lack of knowledge and information as well as challenges in complying with processes is usually attributed to both men and women rather than being viewed as a unique challenge facing women traders.<sup>6</sup> Where opportunities for improving border processes can be made, such improvements are seen by many interviewees to be gender-neutral, without necessarily accounting for women-specific challenges. Thankfully this is now changing – gender-sensitive reforms are under way throughout the region.

2. Specifically, the Law 'On Amendments and Additions to Several Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan Regarding Social Protection for Certain Categories of Citizens', October 2021.

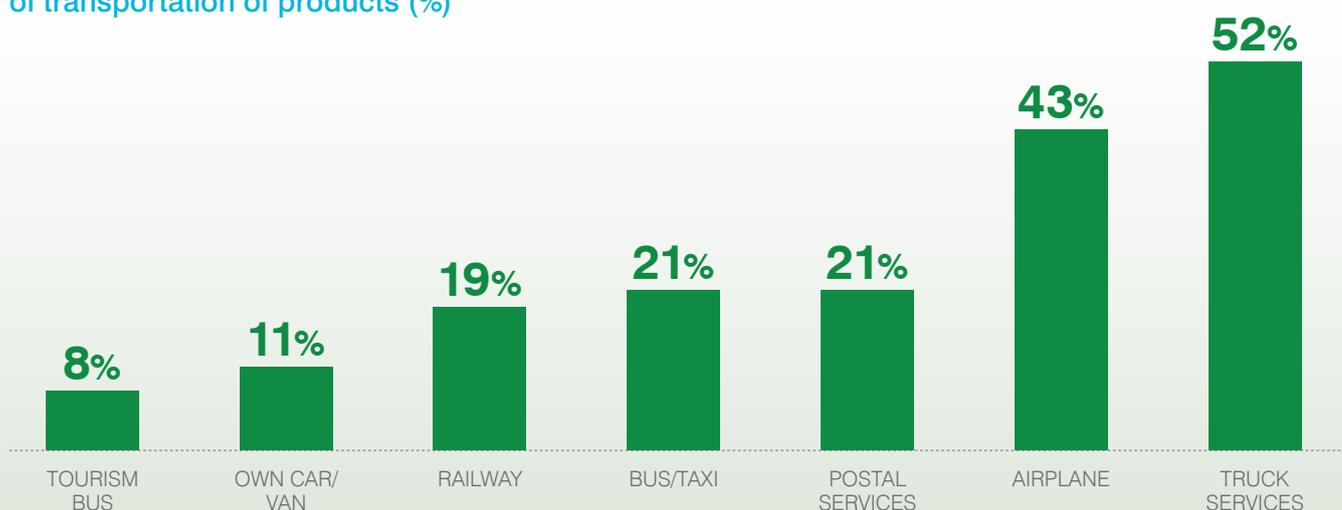
3. ITC survey of women traders.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Insight taken from various interviews conducted across the five Central Asian countries.

**Figure 5 : Women traders' usage rates for different modes of transportation of products (%)**



**Source:** ITC survey of Women Traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options.

- Although not unique to Central Asian countries, NTFCs do not always account for gender mainstreaming in Customs and cross-border trade issues.
- Based on ITC findings, Customs clearances are not without their challenges: on average, it takes between two and three days to release and clear goods. Other burdens are also associated with the paperwork required for cross-border trade. For example, women interviewees in Kyrgyzstan indicated that the tax certificate they are required to obtain every two months is unduly burdensome for the small volumes of goods that they import.
- Logistics is equally expensive – poor infrastructure, limited connectivity to markets and unreliable or costly transport services were cited as the top three limitations impeding women traders and businesses from further expansion (see Figure 5).<sup>7</sup>
- Women traders often lack access to information and are unaware of processes and tools for business support.<sup>8</sup> Training and information-sharing is therefore critical in terms of updating women on new regulatory requirements and processes, as well as helping them formalize their business practices.

Survey findings from women traders and business associations offer slightly different findings related to challenges preventing access to international markets. Business associations rank government officials'

7. ITC survey of business associations, civil society organizations and international entities working with women traders.

8. Interview with National Chamber of Entrepreneurs 'Atameken', Kazakhstan, September 2020.

9. ITC survey of women traders, in which 1,293 out of 1,506 surveyed women traders completed this part of the questionnaire.

engagement with traders, unfriendly and cumbersome border processes, and insufficient time to access relevant information required for trading as the top three challenges facing women traders in the region.

In comparison, women traders themselves<sup>9</sup> rated cumbersome regulations and procedures at Customs as the primary obstacle, followed by requirements for obtaining certifications and authorizations, and limited access to timely and easy-to-understand information. More information is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Challenges faced by women traders, according to survey results**

CHALLENGE IDENTIFIED	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS
Cumbersome regulations and procedures at Customs (e.g. long processing times at the border)	45%
High requirements for obtaining certifications / authorizations (e.g. obtaining export permits, sanitary and phytosanitary compliance, etc.)	42%
Limited access to timely and easy-to-understand information (including at the border)	28%
Lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of regulations	23%
Government officers lack of information, or mishandling of issues (e.g. bribery and corruption at the border, confiscation of goods, overcharging of duties, etc.)	22%

Interestingly, the survey findings illustrate that the bottom three concerns differ from those found in other parts of the world; for example, in African countries. For the Central Asian women entrepreneurs and traders surveyed, their bottom three concerns were related to unfair competition from informal traders, immigration requirements and insufficient concern for personal safety at borders, which are often predominant concerns in Africa.<sup>10</sup>



**Findings from the ITC surveys highlight specific challenges that women traders face in the region that can be grouped into**

**four main areas: policymaking that is not gender-responsive, limited access to finance, lack of information and knowledge about cross-border trade, and insufficient confidence and capacity to fully participate in cross-border trade.** These challenges are discussed in more detail below.



**At a policymaking level, there is a great need for gender-disaggregated data collection and improved gender responsiveness in the design of trade facilitation reforms and support programmes**

Across the region, gender mainstreaming is a top-down affair. In fact, as many as 75% of surveyed trade-related agencies in Central Asia are not integrating gender analysis and indicators in their work.

Some stakeholders have indicated little grass-roots participation or involvement from the business sector in preparation of legislation – as was the case with Turkmenistan’s National Action Plan on Gender Equality<sup>11</sup> – or even awareness of gender-specific legislation, as with Kyrgyzstan’s National Strategy on Gender Equality 2020.<sup>12</sup>

The quality of support on offer to women in their various roles in the economy requires policymakers to acknowledge this multifaceted role in the design and implementation of policies and economic inclusion programmes. Ensuring the success of such policies and programmes depends on policymakers and state agencies’ staff being appropriately capacitated, committed to advancing women’s economic and social progress at a policy level, and ensuring that appropriate gender-responsive budgeting takes place to ensure all government departments can account for gender mainstreaming in their daily activities. For example, stakeholders report that in some cases, field officers are not necessarily always aware of changes in duties and regulations; and executing officers do not always have all the correct information at hand. Gender sensitization of government officials is therefore critical in ensuring awareness and implementation of policies, especially where they have a gender-based angle.<sup>13</sup>

Across the region, there has been little use of tools such as gender-based analysis, gender-inclusive analysis and gender budgeting in policymaking, law-making and the design of support programmes.

**25%**

Of all agencies have integrated gender-sensitive indicators such as reviews, surveys, etc.

Of all government agencies report not having any gender focal points to measure policies and ensure budgetary allocations for gender issues

**44%**

**20%**

Of all government agencies cover women’s inclusion and gender-specific matters in staff training

Of all agencies do not have gender-sensitive indicators in their monitoring and evaluation tools

**46%**

Until recently, the absence of both data and collection of data on cross-border trade has meant that it is difficult for policymakers to understand on-the-ground realities and challenges, and devise laws and support programmes that can further women’s participation in trade.<sup>14</sup> **Collection of gender-disaggregated data among Central Asian countries remains low, with 80% of surveyed institutions confirming that no gender-disaggregated data on women traders is collected at all.**<sup>15</sup>



**Women are not strong participants as policymakers in the region and this restriction extends to their participation in trade facilitation reforms**

**‘Women have little opportunity to expand their presence in public administration and politics. In politics, there are almost only men, who do not lobby women’s interests sufficiently’**

10. *Ibid.*

11. Interviews with Turkmenistan stakeholders, September 2020.

12. Interviews with Kyrgyzstan stakeholders, August 2020.

13. Interviews with Turkmenistan stakeholders, September 2020.

14. Interviews with Customs and Statistic Committee, Kyrgyzstan.

15. ITC survey of business associations, civil society organizations and international entities working with women traders.

**Up to 69% of surveyed women claimed they are not consulted on proposed changes to official procedures,<sup>16</sup> while 42% do not participate in meetings on proposed legislative reforms – although they indicated they would like to do so, if invited.**

Women traders' ability to participate in policymaking and public-private dialogues (through their business associations and women's trade associations) is also affected by their knowledge about trade and business skills – or the lack thereof – as well as how procedures and legislative changes are made public knowledge.

**Stronger working relations – through dialogue and consultations – can also be cultivated between the public and the private sector to promote better private sector participation in government decision-making across the region.**

ITC data collected from the survey of business associations and civil society organizations provided mixed findings in terms of government relations and the accessibility and understanding of border information. This calls for greater inclusion of WBAs in the work of NTFCs and other platforms for public-private dialogue, as well as surveys and other mechanisms for collection of feedback.

#### ITC DATA SHOWS THAT...

**79%**

of business associations surveyed responded that they participate (directly or indirectly) in meetings on changes or drafting of legislation / processes affecting business

**54%**

said that it is sometimes easy for their association to understand border regulations and procedures

**Only 51%**

feel that their recommendations are taken into consideration

**Only 48%**

said that information on official border regulations is easily accessible



**Insufficient financial resources to start and conduct business and trade operations is a critical constraint for women traders**

Central Asian countries are not alone in the challenges facing women entrepreneurs and traders in accessing financing sources. Like many other developing countries, women across the region face different challenges in accessing financing, including the absence of collateral and lack of a credit track record sufficient to secure loans. These two challenges are respectively ranked as the highest and second-highest challenges for accessing credit.<sup>17</sup>



**Only 25%** of women traders have a bank account



**Only 27%** of women traders manage to save money during a year



**31%** of women traders report that the cost of a loan is too high



**25%** of women traders report lack of collateral as an important issue

For example, in 2017, almost 60% of women in the region did not possess a bank account (OECD, 2021). Countries such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan report among the highest gender gaps in financial inclusion. This low level of financial participation underscores challenges facing women traders and entrepreneurs not only in terms of participating fully in the economy but also in securing long-term social protections via financial savings.<sup>18</sup>

Since women entrepreneurs and small-scale traders often do not qualify for loans and financial support from commercial and traditional banking institutions, it is advisable that **policymakers investigate opportunities that can provide more flexible and gender-sensitive financial support in the form of microloans, cooperative financing and grant-based support, if possible.**



**Women lack information and knowledge on cross-border trade in an accessible format to support their understanding of rules and requirements**

Central Asian women traders and SME owners are not unique in their challenges in accessing information

**Limited access to credit and trade finance is identified as the number one challenge impeding women's expansion of their businesses into international markets**

16. ITC survey of women traders. Some 1,260 respondents answered this question.

17. ITC survey of women traders. A total of 1,200 respondents answered this question.

18. *Ibid.*

related to cross-border trade regulations and procedures. However, the lack of timely access to regulations, cross-border trade requirements and market access requirements is a huge hindrance to international trade expansion.

Findings from the ITC survey illustrate that **women traders are not well-informed about changes to business procedures and relevant legislation with the majority – 62% of them – learning about these changes after implementation has taken place.**<sup>19</sup>

Most Central Asian governments publish proposed changes to legislation on official websites; however, more emphasis can be placed on distributing information on legislative changes through consultations with businesses, and handouts with easy guidelines sent to WBAs and industry associations.<sup>20</sup> These measures will help ensure that women traders obtain the correct information, especially since findings show that women traders are predominantly reliant (46%) on personal networks and word of mouth to obtain information related to border processes and markets.<sup>21</sup>

#### ITC FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY OF 1,500 WOMEN TRADERS SHOW THAT...



A lack of access to information on markets (channels, prices, market regulations) is identified as the second highest limitation for expansion of women's businesses



Over 50% of women traders in Central Asia find information on official border regulations hard to understand / inaccessible



35% of women surveyed said training government officials on procedures + communication with traders would improve their daily trading activities

In other findings from the ITC surveys, businesses indicated that information is not always easily accessible for women traders (especially those in rural areas), who might rely on informal trading routes and word-of-mouth information (which might be dated) when engaging in their daily trading activities. To this end, **awareness-raising and sensitization on the importance of using formal trade routes, the presence of trade information desks and user-friendly information platforms are necessary to ensure that more women traders are better informed and more confident in undertaking their daily trading activities.**

19. ITC survey of women traders.

20. ITC predominantly surveyed Customs and related agencies, the NTFC and standards institutions on this topic.

21. ITC survey of women traders.

59%

Of women learn about changes in trade procedures only after the date of effective entry into force

Of women trader respondents find information on official border regulations and procedures easy to understand

50%

46%

Of women traders think information is not always easily accessible

Of women asked for information desks at border crossings as a priority

14%



## Building the confidence and skills of women on cross-border trade, advocacy and digital solutions is a priority

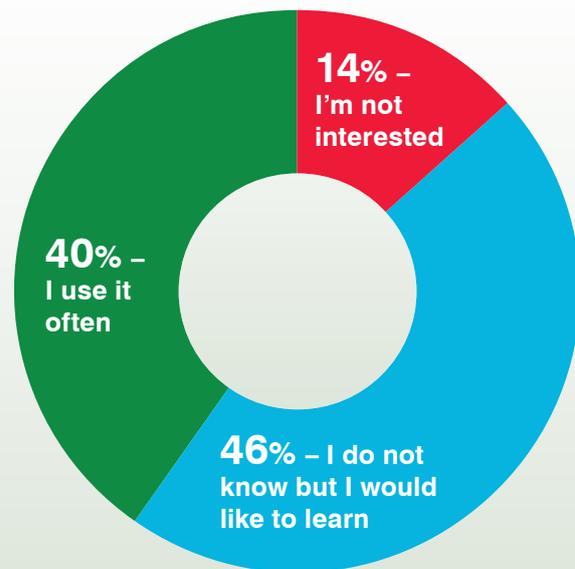
Across the region, business chambers, export agencies and private associations can play important roles in helping their SME members gain better access to international markets and, where possible, to work with women's businesses to achieve the economies of scale necessary to meet exporting requirements, with support of this nature already under way (see Figure 6).<sup>22</sup>

However, only 35% of surveyed women report receiving training on trade and business skills. At the same time, there is a **strong demand for this type of training** (especially for cross-border trade): **90% of women surveyed by ITC reported that training on trade procedures and advocacy, as well as on entrepreneurial skills, would be highly beneficial for their businesses.**

**The survey also demonstrates that training and capacity building should go beyond traditional areas.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the importance of digital trade and digitization for both governments and businesses alike. While there has been a global trend towards further increasing automated Customs clearances and related services, women traders run the risk of being left behind in an increasingly automated world. **Public and private sector actors should consider providing information technology-related training and information-sharing sessions on e-commerce, digital trade and automated trading processes** to business chambers, WBAs and all other relevant private sector bodies.

Figure 7: Survey responses from women traders on how much they know about e-commerce



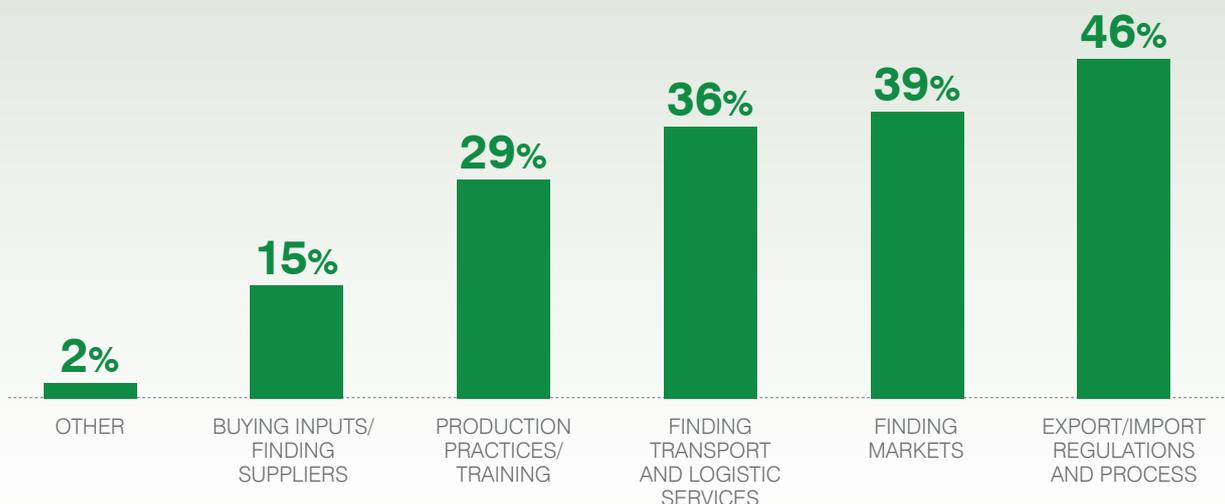
Source: ITC survey of women traders.

Lastly, **SMEs identified that a centralized, online system designed offer trainings to women entrepreneurs and to provide information on international trade procedures, and aid with tax and Customs requirements, would help them to better understand the requirements for trading internationally.**<sup>23</sup>

22. ITC survey of women traders.

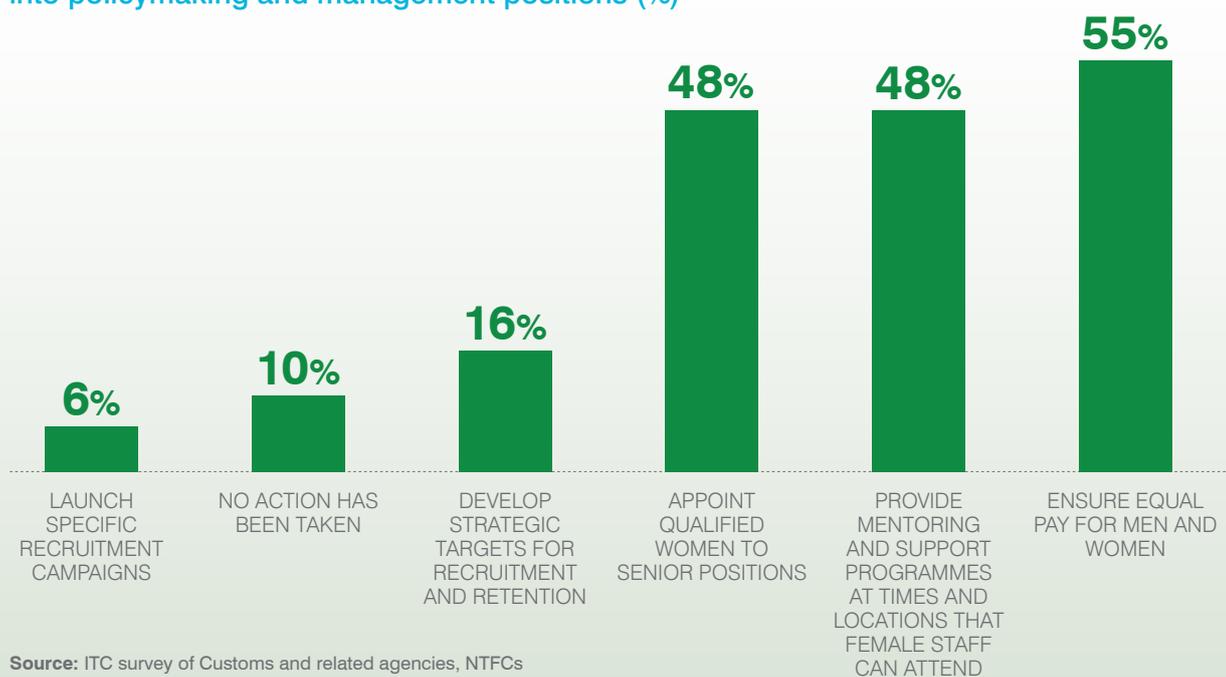
23. Interviews with Kyrgyzstan stakeholders (women-owned businesses and business associations), August 2020.

Figure 6: Women traders' experience of assistance offered to them by business associations (%)



Source: ITC survey of Women Traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options.

**Figure 8: Survey respondents' perception of actions taken by governments to increase recruitment and retention of female staff into policymaking and management positions (%)**



**Source:** ITC survey of Customs and related agencies, NTFCs and standards institutions with the ability to include multiple-choice options.

## There are also signs of positive change

**Kyrgyzstan has a National Strategy for Gender Equality 2020, which focuses on women's economic empowerment** in non-traditional sectors and includes provision for broad-based collection of gender-disaggregated data, and gender-responsive budgeting. As part of the Kyrgyz Programme to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship for 2022–2026, an Advisory Council for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship was established under the Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic, which will become a dialogue platform between the state, business and civil society. With support from UN Women, Kazakhstan has also begun rolling out appropriate trainings to local governments (Economic Research Institute, 2020).

Tajikistan's National Development Strategy 2030 caters for gender mainstreaming across government policies and gender-responsive budgeting – although collection of gender-disaggregated data should extend beyond social issues to include information relevant to gender mainstreaming for trade policies that affect women traders, entrepreneurs and SME business owners.

In addition, findings from ITC surveys<sup>24</sup> show that Central Asian governments are making efforts to actively recruit female staff into policymaking and management positions (see Figure 8). Efforts are being made to offer gender-related training and capacity building at least annually to officers working with traders. While there is still a way to go until gender mainstreaming is fully implemented, inclusion of women as part of policymaking is an important step forward in addressing existing gender imbalances.

**ITC has been instrumental in providing training to women entrepreneurs and traders (350 have been trained thus far) on Customs legislation, regulatory frameworks for trade, and rules and obligations for engaging in cross-border trade**

To this end, **Uzbekistan shows regional leadership via its commitment to more than double the number of women employees in Customs authorities** (currently at 8%) between 2022 and 2024.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the country also boasts more than 375 women Customs officials. Among them 24 are in leadership positions and 87 in central management, and notably, 25 are in positions associated with foreign economic activity. Furthermore, 240 female employees are stationed at border Customs posts, demonstrating resilience in tackling the challenges inherent in their service. This is an important step towards ensuring a more women-friendly approach is supported at border crossings.

24. On this subject ITC surveyed predominantly Customs and related agencies, NTFCs and standards institutions.

25. President of Uzbekistan's statement at a meeting on transforming the Customs service into a corruption-free system, 17 February 2022.

## Trade facilitation reforms and other initiatives directly and indirectly supporting inclusion of women in trade are also growing across the region

Over the past few years, important steps have been taken to improve trade facilitation requirements and processes within the region. Not only have such steps simplified intraregional trade and promoted best practices for trade facilitation among these countries, but these measures have also had positive ramifications for women traders and entrepreneurs. **To date, improvements to trade facilitation measures in Central Asia have been coupled with gender-progressive steps taken by these governments vis-à-vis their policies, programmes and regulatory procedures for cross-border trade.**

**Some of the most important efforts under way include the launch of trade information portals, simplification of Customs and transport regulations, and harmonization and data exchange among different state agencies to smooth cross-border trade at the national level<sup>26</sup>**

As of July 2021, Uzbekistan had taken proactive steps to simplify Customs administration and procedures to widen access to export markets for businesswomen engaged in cross-border trade.<sup>27</sup> Risk management automated systems were introduced in December 2018, using 'yellow' and 'red' corridors for holding of goods, and continue to be upgraded according to best

practices. Digital technologies have been used to further simplify Customs procedures, including implementing remote Customs clearance of submitted electronic cargo Customs declarations as of October 2021 (International Trade Administration United States Department of Commerce, 2023).

Following piloting of the initial phase, Tajikistan announced the launch of its one-stop shop (i.e. a single-window system) in September 2020, with the purpose of simplifying foreign trade procedures (export/ import procedures and border control). The single window was launched in October 2022, with training offered to business companies, officials and Customs specialists on how to use it (<https://www.swcustoms.tj/>).<sup>28</sup> This is an important step forward in improving Tajikistan's 'doing business' conditions, and the system simplifies business and international trade activities for foreign economic operators and local businesses alike. A Coordinating Committee on Trade Facilitation Procedures continuously reviews the requirements and simplification of procedures. In 2023 it invited WBAs to join the Committee.

In Kyrgyzstan, interviewees highlighted the **improvement of the digital tax service, which has become more**

26. On this subject ITC surveyed predominantly Customs and related agencies, NTFCs and standards institutions.

27. Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of 8 July 2021 'On additional measures to further simplify Customs administration and procedures'.

28. See presentation of the Tajikistan Single Window team at the Peer Learning Initiative event on National Single Window Implementation and Management, 12–14 October 2022, Islamabad, Pakistan.



**user-friendly for women traders** and improved provision of Customs services overall.<sup>29</sup> The country has begun implementing a number of border reforms, including a **single-window system** as well as a Trade Facilitation Roadmap for 2021–2025 that is focused on improving the existing regulatory framework and enhancing digitalization of procedures, promoting sustainable trade facilitation measures and simplifying trade procedures.

Currently, a key priority in the Kyrgyz Republic is the digitization of business processes in the area of goods conformity assessment, as these processes are primarily paper-based and labour-intensive. For instance, a pilot project is under way on issuing electronic test protocols to increase procedural transparency and reliability. Additionally, attention is being given to improving inter-agency information exchange through a mapping of agencies' information systems and interaction flows. This will result in recommendations to link information systems, enhancing their interoperability and expanding the functionality of the single-window system.

Kazakhstan is taking steps to advance digital and paperless cross-border trade through joining the Framework Agreement on Facilitating Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (Haidar & Kulbatyrov, 2023). Key recent advancements in trade facilitation also include the implementation of a single window for export / import operations (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2019) and the 'ASTANA-1' system for electronic Customs declarations, significantly reducing processing times by switching to electronic exchange between Customs and traders ('Kazinform' International News Agency, 2023). The state database 'e-licensing' system has further automated the issuing of licences, permits and certificates (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022). Additionally, agreements for pre-arrival information exchange with nine countries are facilitating faster Customs operations, minimizing paperwork and enhancing the Customs risk management system (Popova, 2023).

Turkmenistan has been actively entering into international agreements that support a conducive trade facilitation environment. In 2021 it joined the International Convention on the simplification and harmonization of Customs procedures (Revised Kyoto Convention) and in 2022, it signed the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. The World Customs Organization also noted significant progress by Turkmenistan in its efforts to adapt its procedures to international standards, which is exemplified by the country's accession in June 2021 to the Customs Convention on Containers and to the Convention on Customs Treatment of Pool Containers Used in International Transport. The State Customs Committee of Turkmenistan also launched the integrated Automated System for Customs Data 'ASYCUDA'. Single-window implementation is also under way.

## At the regional level

In May 2023, the Central Asia Gateway trade information portal was launched in all the region's countries. Combining information from all countries' trade facilitation portals, the trade information portal provides businesses with easy access to information on cross-border trade formalities, considering the specifics in the context of trade within the region, outside the region, and to the region's countries, thus strengthening regional trade relations with international partners. It already serves more than 160,000 users and was also used to establish simplification roadmaps in Central Asian countries, and helped to implement more than 40 detailed recommendations to smoothen cross-border trade.

With the support of the German Agency for International Cooperation project Trade Facilitation in Central Asia, in April 2023 the Central Asian governments also signed a regional legal instrument on the interaction of NTFCs to take cooperation among countries' committees to a new level, facilitating the expansion of information exchange and consultations.

The Central Asia International Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation on the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as the Kyrgyz-Kazakh industrial, trade and logistics complex near the Ak-Tilek and Karasu checkpoints are also among the new regional cooperation initiatives for development of trade and transport connectivity in Central Asia.

## Special programmes and initiatives to support women in trade and women in Customs services are also taking shape

In collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, the Committee on Women and Gender Equality Affairs and the State Customs Committee in Uzbekistan have launched a programme 'Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions'. The purpose of the programme is to promote women's empowerment and gender equality among Uzbek government agencies, and **the State Customs Committee is the first public institution in Uzbekistan to embrace the programme – the first of its kind in Uzbekistan and in Central Asia** (United Nations Development Programme Uzbekistan, 2022).

As of 2014, Tajikistan also has a **Task Force on Women Entrepreneurship Support** that has an objective of supporting women entrepreneurs to lobby and advocate for their interests. It provides a platform for public-private dialogue and a forum in which to discuss 'doing business' concerns, and provides an avenue for women entrepreneurs to lobby the government about their

29. Interviews with Kyrgyzstan stakeholders, August 2020.

problems through the Secretariat of the Presidential Advisory Council of the Republic of Tajikistan.

**The Task Force is regarded as one of the most successful platforms for public-private dialogue between WBAs and the government.** For example, the Task Force successfully lobbied for the interests of women entrepreneurs in the adoption of the new Tax Code of the Republic of Tajikistan in January 2022. The Tax Code aims to reduce tax on the payroll of the private sector by 5%, and as a result of Task Force advocacy efforts, further discusses the issue of access to finance for women with disabilities, as well as a reduction in the percentage tax rate for women entrepreneurs (Bennett et al., 2019).<sup>30</sup>

**'I realize that I probably know only 10% of the cross-border trade knowledge required to export.'**

**GAIZAMIRA VIKTOROVNA,  
ITC WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT**

Insofar as creating an enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship, **Uzbekistan has created Women's Entrepreneurship Centres.** These provide employment assistance and retraining for women who have been out of the workplace for an extended period; and assist women in starting their own business and developing their business management skills (LexUZ On-line, 2019). These measures are complementary to the government's efforts to strengthen vocational training and assist women with access to equipment, technology, business space, financial assistance and partners for entrepreneurial development.

As of November 2021, **Kazakhstan had launched the first of its resource centres** (the government

aims to launch 16 centres) **aimed at providing women entrepreneurs with a full range of non-financial services and practical guidance to implement their business entrepreneurial ventures** (Satubaldina, 2022).

Similarly, Kyrgyzstan has implemented a Programme to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship for 2022–2026, focused on three key areas:

- Women who want to engage in entrepreneurial activities and start-up enterprises under the leadership of women
- Assist existing women-led enterprises to further diversify and modernize
- Stimulation of export-oriented SMEs led by women.<sup>31</sup>

Programme priorities include the provision of equal access to financial instruments and lending, creation of a competitive regulatory environment, and reduction of both administrative barriers and costs for women entrepreneurs.

Lastly, positive inroads are being made to enhance training and capacity-building offerings to women traders, entrepreneurs and SME owners. **Findings from business associations and civil society organizations in the region<sup>32</sup> show that training and capacity building is their primary offering – with the top three trainings on offer being business skills, production practice and product diversification, and training on market compliance.** To this end, what may be required is greater outreach by business associations to women traders and women entrepreneurs to help bridge the knowledge gaps that currently exist in the region. ●

30. Interview with Mrs Manuchehra Majonova, Head of the Task Force on Women Entrepreneurship Support.

31. Programme to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022–2026.

32. ITC surveyed business associations, civil society organizations and international entities working with women traders on this subject. Most respondents (32%) came from Kazakhstan, followed by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.



## CHAPTER 2:

# Making borders work for women: Highlights from ITC interventions thus far

The results of the interviews and surveys allowed the R4TCA project to design interventions to support a more conducive border and trade environment for women, as well as women's skills in cross-border trade and in leadership positions.

Below is an overview of current reforms and new steps taken by Central Asian countries to implement gender-responsive trade facilitation reforms

### Gender-responsive trade facilitation training for Customs officials

ITC initiated work with Customs administrations and WBAs in Central Asia to explain the challenges that women face in trade, based on survey results, and initiate change on the ground. The project developed a training programme on Gender-Responsive Trade Facilitation for Border Officials that was fully adapted to regional needs. It then conducted a training of trainers for experts from each Customs administration to equip them with appropriate technical and pedagogical tools to facilitate discussions with their colleagues in their respective

countries. This was crucial to ensure the sustainability and reach of the intervention.

**The master trainers successfully delivered capacity-building sessions under ITC supervision to more than 650 border officials across five Central Asian countries.** The officials learned how to analyse constraints that women face in cross-border trade and develop fair and ethical trade facilitation practices to create a gender-responsive border environment. In the spirit of inclusive public-private dialogue, women entrepreneurs also took part in the workshops and had the opportunity to share their experiences and the challenges they face directly with border officials. Many stakeholders noted that the sessions brought a new perspective to their daily work and expressed interest in incorporating this gender-responsive approach in future activities.

**One year after the training, 60% of beneficiaries reported gender-responsive changes in border operations.** For example, among many other actions, additional consultations for women traders are provided, more women officials conduct inspections, and gender-sensitive behavioural practices are being applied at the border. Some participants went so far as to admit to better understanding their wives and providing more support to their daily activities.

**Customs administrations, initially sceptical, are satisfied with the results and will incorporate the programme as part of their curriculum for sustainability.** They have also established stronger partnerships and continuous dialogue with WBAs. Beneficiaries are requesting more training of this type, including for women leaders to emerge and to attract young talent in Customs administration.

Lastly, **participation, organization, and promotion of regional and international events focusing on exchanging best practices for women's inclusion in trade can also yield valuable synergies.** Establishing a Central Asia Union of WBAs and a Regional Partnership of Customs Brokers Associations, along with fostering cooperation among NTFCs, are significant milestones. These actions lay the groundwork for an integrated approach that enhances gender mainstreaming and promotes a more inclusive and prosperous trade environment across the region.

## Women leadership for Customs officials: overcoming gender barriers and creating change

*'Now I am ready to break the barriers that were holding me back and make a real change in my current career.'*

Customs is traditionally a male-dominated industry and it is more difficult for women to grow in their career and assume leadership roles in Customs than in other professions. However, 90% of surveyed women Customs officials in **Uzbekistan** shared with ITC their interest in growing in their jobs and taking on new responsibilities.

ITC and the State Customs Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan joined hands to support women in Customs to advance their careers. They conducted a training programme that boosted the skills of 50 women Customs officials through interactive sessions and exercises on emotional intelligence, effective thinking, conflict resolution,





communication and negotiations, presentation and reporting, as well as management skills. By supporting an increase of women in leadership positions in the Customs Committee, the programme aims to promote gender equality and create a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

The programme was well-received by participants, who praised its focus on soft skills and leadership development. More trainings and individual coaching sessions were requested to further support women's readiness for leadership roles and career progression.

***'We are always focusing on technical knowledge in Customs but now we realize the value of soft skills for future growth.'***

Another participant, Rahmanova Olga, commented, 'This training undoubtedly allowed us to increase the human resources potential of our employees. The organizers managed to combine theoretical and interactive parts in such a way that it was very informative and interesting for everyone. These knowledge and skills can be used not only in our professional activities but also in daily life.'

## **Fostering women's confidence and knowledge of trade facilitation**

Many women-led businesses in Central Asia want to expand their businesses and reach new international markets, and as shown previously, ITC survey findings showed a strong demand for gender-focused training in cross-border trade.

***'We are planning to expand our activity abroad but my knowledge in the field of foreign economic activity is probably 10% of what is needed.'***

To respond to that need, ITC worked in close collaboration with WBAs and Customs brokers' associations in Central Asia, and ran workshops in 15 cities and remote areas in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. To make it easier to attend the three-day trainings, all the sessions were held in family-friendly environments so women could participate with their children.

More than 350 women attended the workshops that allowed them to learn more about Customs legislation and international regulatory frameworks, specifics of negotiations with Customs brokers, as well as rules, rights and obligations when crossing the border. After the trainings, women shared very positive feedback and requested more trainings of such content.

'Now I am more confident in my own abilities to trade internationally. I learned relevant rules and regulations, know my rights and how to act in certain situations at the border. Practical advice I received at the training was especially useful'. Kholbibibi Eshonboboyeva, Dushanbe.

'I suggest reaching as many women entrepreneurs in remote regions and towns of Kazakhstan as possible because they do not have all necessary information, especially on newly adopted laws and changes in Customs regulations.' Karlygash Alikhanovna, Kostanay city, Kazakhstan.

'Once my shipment was stuck for five months and was already perished upon arrival. Now I know how to deal with such situations. I received a lot of useful information that will help me to ask my supplier and logistics company the right questions. Today's knowledge will help me avoid losses in the future.' Assel Nurkanova (supplier of fabrics from Italy). ●





## CHAPTER 3:

# Charting a way forward

The Central Asia region – and in particular Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – is making progress towards gender-responsive policymaking. Endeavours of governments and business associations as well as donors and development partners have contributed to this trend. Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities for improvement.

The following recommendations are put forth based on insights gleaned from interviews, surveys and training outcomes of the R4TCA project

## Increase transparency in trade procedures and implement digital reforms for the benefit of women

### 1. Provide transparent access to information through trade portals and 'one-stop' information desks

**Government institutions ranked transparent access to information as the foremost resource that can support women traders.** The launch of the Central Asia Gateway information portal marked a major stride for accessible cross-border trade data. These types of trade information portals are designed to facilitate accessible and transparent information on cross-border trade

requirements. However, continuous efforts are vital for greater transparency. Regular updates, including tailored changes to meet the needs of women traders, coupled with an enquiry point, are essential. In addition, timely publication of new regulations is crucial to allow women traders ample time to prepare and adjust. Pertinent updates on procedures, fees and taxes can also be made visible at border points, terminals and border agencies via screens, handouts and posters.

## 2. Consider implementing STRs to support smoother and easier cross-border trading for women traders and SME owners in the region<sup>33</sup>

**Introducing an STR harmonized across borders intra-regionally is key to facilitating smoother cross-border trade for women traders and SME owners.**

STRs simplify trade requirements and Customs processes, and outline clear monetary thresholds for goods covered. A gender-responsive tariff schedule can be introduced and include goods vital for women-led businesses and commonly traded by women cross-border traders. STRs also serve as tools to support improved intraregional cross-border trade, enabling policymakers to better collect gender-disaggregated trade data and further streamlining processes for small traders as a region.

**Trade Information Desk officers stationed at border crossings** and working in collaboration with WBAs can play a vital role in facilitating STRs as well, offering guidance on Customs rules and changes, and helping women traders complete necessary forms.

## 3. Strengthen digital reforms and paperless cross-border solutions to better support women's participation in cross-border trade

**The digitization of Customs procedures is a critical advancement, particularly for small-scale traders, including women.** By eliminating the reliance on paper copies and increasing awareness of women traders about electronic submission options and platforms to work with Customs and border agencies, trade costs and time can be significantly reduced. Such measures offer women traders the flexibility to combine business endeavours with family commitments, averting complexities and delays at border crossings.

**Amid the implementation of digital solutions at a centralized level, it is important to continuously upgrade information technology infrastructure at all border posts.** This ensures seamless processing of e-documents and declarations, minimizing potential delays. Further active deployment of measures like advance ruling and pre-arrival processing would be

especially beneficial to women traders, enhancing their access to digitalization and expediting cargo release.

**Comprehensive training for Trade Information Desk officers should also be provided to ensure their adeptness in using digital systems effectively.**

Equipped with expertise, they can provide invaluable guidance and support to women traders navigating digital procedures and requirements.

## Inform gender-responsive trade policymaking

### 1. Incorporate gender-responsive measures in trade facilitation reforms and strengthen partnerships between WBAs and NTFCs

**Embedding gender sensitivity into the implementation of all trade facilitation reforms is crucial. By doing so, the specific constraints and aspirations of women traders are duly acknowledged and addressed.** When enacting such reforms, a thorough gender analysis is recommended, with gender considerations seamlessly woven into the implementation process. For instance, during the execution of an Authorized Economic Operator scheme, Customs can engage WBAs to gain insights into the unique challenges they encounter when seeking Authorized Economic Operator status. This gender-inclusive approach will lead to more comprehensive and impactful trade policies, ensuring equitable access to advantages and opportunities for women traders, ultimately enhancing economic empowerment and gender equality.

**Implementing structured opportunities for dialogue between WBAs and NTFCs is critical for consultative trade facilitation reforms that meet the needs of women traders and entrepreneurs.** This approach not only fosters improved government-private sector relations but also facilitates invaluable feedback loops, enabling officials to gain insights into gender-sensitive enhancements for border processes, Customs and trade facilitation.

**Integration of WBAs into other pertinent trade committees, working groups and informal consultations is also essential.** Active involvement necessitates facilitation, including awareness-raising on participation modalities, benefits and platform dynamics. Crucially, sharing pertinent information discussed in these platforms – such as agendas, discussion papers and protocols – with WBAs bolsters inclusivity.

33. Interviews with Turkmenistan stakeholders, September 2020.

## 2. Transform internal practices to empower women in public institutions through gender focal points

**Mere policy adoption for gender inclusion and dialogue participation is insufficient.** True progress requires internal institutional adjustments. A challenge highlighted in the R4TCA survey shows that Women Affairs departments tend to prioritize service provision, sidelining decision-making and policy influence within their national governments.

**A dynamic solution lies in establishing gender focal points, offering a comprehensive and multifaceted approach.** These focal points can collaborate with various departments, fostering a holistic gender mainstreaming strategy across government policies. Inclusion of gender focal points within entities like Customs, Ministries of Trade and NTFCs marks a pivotal stride. Alternatively, a single focal point overseeing these institutions can also significantly drive progress.

**Gender focal points will support departments in integrating gender into policies, plans and codes of conduct.** In doing so, it is advisable they prioritize the following interventions:

- Review and update gender-disaggregated data for responsive planning
- Identify strategies for gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation's hard and soft infrastructure, and work with government partners to design and implement necessary policy reforms
- Facilitate networks of women officials across agencies, advocating for their interests and supporting women traders.

## 3. Introduce gender-responsive budgeting to turn policy into meaningful impact

**Gender-responsive budgeting will ensure that policies can be implemented because appropriate budgets are allocated to interventions.** Economic and trade policies need to have implementable support programmes – with budget allocations – attached to them so that human resource needs, institutional support mechanisms and other relevant costs can duly be accounted for in implementation, and to ensure successful outcomes. In addition, civil society, local government (that often knows and understands local constituents' needs better) and business associations and chambers should all play a part in helping implement targeted support programmes geared at enhancing women's participation in trade, in order to ensure a public-private partnership to support implementation of these policies in real ways.

## Create a conducive border environment to empower women traders

### 1. Conduct a comprehensive assessment to integrate gender-responsive infrastructure across Central Asia's border posts

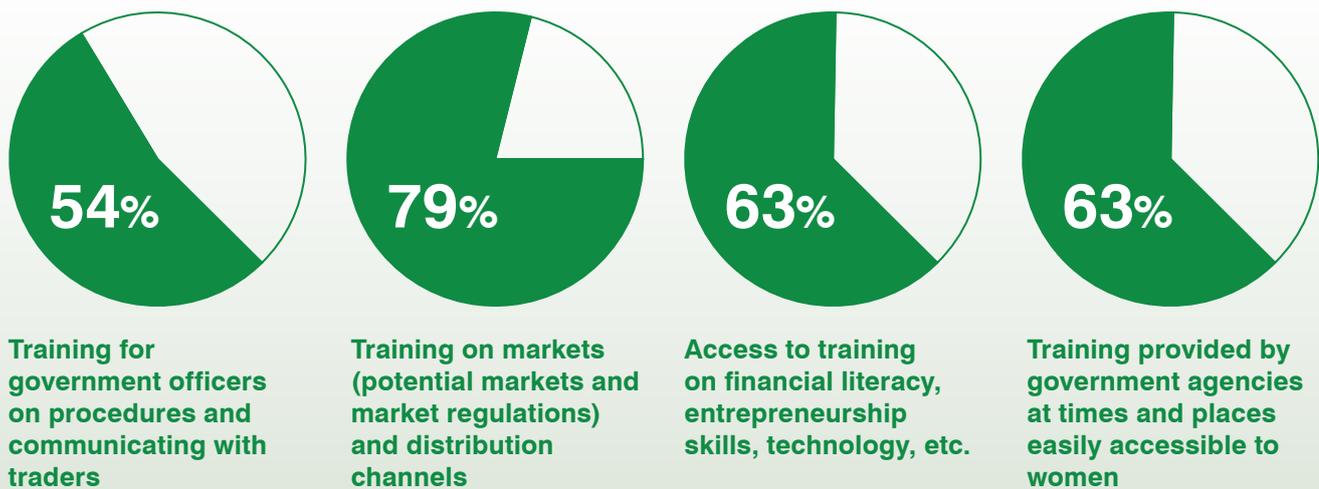
This process should prioritize adaptations that cater to women traders' requirements, enhancing their daily trade operations. Notably, the ITC survey reveals that storage facilities, information desks and testing facilities rank as the top three essential amenities at border crossings. Significantly, the availability of these resources ranks as the second most impactful assistance for women traders. Implementing gender-sensitive infrastructure adjustments aligns with fostering a conducive trading environment that empowers and supports women traders in the region. Figure 9 provides more details.

**Figure 9: Infrastructure facilities most needed at Central Asian border crossings, as identified by women traders**



**Source:** ITC survey of women traders. In total, 1,193 respondents answered this question.

Figure 10: The type of training that women traders would like to have (% of survey responses)



Source: ITC survey of Women Traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options.

## 2. Improve border regulatory agencies' practices of collecting gender-disaggregated trade data

**Effective data collection is key to enhancing understanding of the challenges faced by women traders and creating strategies for fostering an enabling trade environment.** Border regulatory agencies should explore avenues to gather gender-disaggregated data concerning traders' profiles, trade partners, service users, and inquiries / challenges received from enquiry points. Incorporating gender-disaggregated data into reform monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is crucial.

### **Collaboration between border regulatory agencies and statistics agencies can amplify data utility.**

Shared data can enhance insights across agencies and can also be linked with other data sources such as business registries. By proactively pursuing these data-driven measures, border regulatory agencies can foster a more supportive and equitable trading environment for women traders.

## 3. Sustain and strengthen gender-responsive awareness initiatives for government officials

**Building on the success of gender-responsive trade facilitation trainings for border officials in Central Asia, there is potential to expand these sessions to a wider spectrum of officials across various government agencies.** Continuously reinforcing the significance of gender mainstreaming and outlining actionable steps for more inclusive trade and economic realms remain crucial.

**Incorporating gender elements into induction training, along with a thorough understanding of the code of conduct, can be an effective mechanism.**

Similarly, introducing dedicated training for hotline and desk operators can enhance their ability to assist women traders effectively.

### **Joint dialogue sessions between border regulatory agencies and WBAs are invaluable to foster collaboration and mutual learning.**

These sessions offer a platform for discussing shared challenges, exchanging best practices and formulating collaborative solutions. By sustaining and enhancing these gender-responsive awareness initiatives, government officials can be better equipped to contribute to a trade environment that is genuinely inclusive.

## Empower women in trade and Customs

### 1. Provide capacity building to enhance the knowledge and confidence of women traders to engage in cross-border trade

**Empowering women traders requires capacity-building efforts to enhance their knowledge of and confidence in cross-border trade.** Stakeholders such as chambers of commerce, export agencies and private associations (Customs brokers' associations, WBAs) can play a key role in supporting women traders to understand cross-border trade requirements, international markets, technological advancements and financial literacy. A special focus on export regulations for handmade items,

crafts and textiles is particularly beneficial for women, who are often involved in these industries. Training in confidence-building and advocacy is also necessary to equip women to actively engage in public-private dialogues.

**Women traders emphasized that exchanges of best practices with regional peers and communication with international experts offer fresh insights to improve their current practices.** They also highlighted the value of regular training sessions and information-sharing from government officials. Simultaneously, sensitizing government officials to effectively provide such awareness-raising support is crucial. See Figure 10 for illustrated findings.

## 2. Enhance financial inclusion for women traders and SME owners

**Ensuring equitable access to affordable credit is crucial to empower women in the trade sector.** Simplified financing mechanisms and increased availability of microcredit could bridge this gap, offering various types of credit. Establishing comprehensive access to finance is a long-term objective, necessitating careful set-up and implementation.

**During this transitional phase, Central Asian governments should explore collaborative ventures with the private sector to introduce specialized loan and microcredit initiatives.** Tailored to women traders and SME owners, these programmes would not only address their specific needs but also align with their risk profiles, ensuring both affordable rates and suitability. This proactive approach fosters economic empowerment, bridging the gender gap and propelling the growth of women-led businesses in the region.

## 3. Invest in women leaders and nurture youth potential

**Fostering an environment that cultivates women's leadership in trade, Customs, logistics and related domains is an important success factor for impactful empowerment of women in these industries.** Employing gender-responsive recruitment strategies

and actively promoting women's participation in border agencies, especially in leadership roles, is key in this regard. Women as role models in these industries will further inspire and motivate the younger generation of women leaders to believe in their capacity for change and progress.

**Moreover, it is essential to proactively create initiatives to attract young women to the trade industry, enabling them to explore potential careers as Customs officers, Customs brokers, freight forwarders and supply chain analysts.** Guiding them towards educational opportunities, facilitating internships and nurturing their initial career steps are key components.

**In Central Asia, several WBAs, Customs brokers' associations and State Customs Committees are already piloting such initiatives.** Their enthusiasm underscores the demand for detailed programme development, which calls for technical support and assistance. By investing in women leaders and empowering youth, we shape a future characterized by gender diversity and collective growth in the trade sector.

## Advance regional dialogue and gender mainstreaming

**Elevating the impact of reforms and gender-responsive initiatives calls for regional implementation.** It is important to ensure coherence and streamlining of women's inclusion in trade during regional negotiations of agreements and reforms in Central Asia. An example of such cooperation may include aligning border crossing working hours with neighbouring countries and deploying border officers trained in women's inclusion during peak crossing times.

**Participation in, and organization and promotion of regional and international events that focus on exchanging best practices for women's inclusion in trade can also yield valuable synergies.** In this regard, the establishment of a Central Asia Union of WBAs and a Regional Partnership of Customs Brokers' Associations, along with fostering cooperation among NTFCs, are significant milestones. These foundations lay the groundwork for an integrated approach that enhances gender mainstreaming and promotes a more inclusive and prosperous trade environment across the region. ●

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Ready4Trade Central Asia aims to contribute to the overall sustainable and inclusive economic development of Central Asia by boosting intra-regional and international trade in the countries of the region. Beneficiaries of the Ready4Trade Central Asia project include governments, small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular women-led enterprises, and business support organizations. The project is funded by the European Union and implemented by the International Trade Centre in close collaboration with national partners.



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