

Gender-Responsive Trade Facilitation for Women in Central Asia

Crossing borders, breaking barriers



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About the paper

Women involved in international trade in Central Asia face multiple barriers hindering their competitiveness and growth. Challenges include lack of information and knowledge about cross-border trade, difficulty accessing finance and insufficient confidence and skills in trade, advocacy and digital solutions.

This report, based on interviews, trainings and surveys across five Central Asian countries, identifies key obstacles and suggests strategies to tackle them. Recommendations for the public and private sectors to empower women traders range from boosting transparency in trade procedures and adopting digital solutions to embedding gender sensitivity into trade facilitation reforms.

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Foreword

Women traders and entrepreneurs across Central Asia face numerous challenges that block their efforts to compete and grow, especially in global markets. Despite the region's economic diversity, these women encounter similar barriers from one country to another, including when it comes to cross-border trade. These barriers affect not just their economic prospects, but also their ability to participate fully in their societies.

This report explores the top challenges that women traders and entrepreneurs in the region face and what more gender-responsive trade facilitation can look like in Central Asia. Its findings and insights are based on interviews, trainings and extensive surveys of 1,506 women traders, 52 business and civil society organizations, and 32 government agencies in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The report finds, for instance, that women traders and entrepreneurs often have limited knowledge about cross-border trade, struggle to access financial resources and frequently lack confidence and skills in trade, advocacy and digital solutions.

Change, however, is on the way. The Central Asian region is making progress on gender-responsive policymaking and governments, business associations, along with donors and development partners, are all helping to make trade facilitation work better for women. Nonetheless, more work remains.

Building on their efforts so far, national governments can boost transparency in trade procedures and adopt digital reforms to benefit women. They can also inform gender-responsive trade policymaking and create a more favourable border environment that empowers women traders, boosting their knowledge of and confidence in cross-border trade. The public and private sectors can also work together more closely to improve opportunities and mechanisms for women traders and business owners across the region.

No one country should act alone. Regional cooperation is essential to establish an integrated approach that promotes gender mainstreaming, supporting a more inclusive and prosperous trade environment across Central Asia.

The International Trade Centre's (ITC) Ready4Trade Central Asia project, financed by the European Union, supports the development of intraregional and international trade in the five Central Asian countries. Empowering women traders and entrepreneurs is a critical part of this project, in both its design and implementation. The project works to increase the transparency of cross-border requirements, remove regulatory and procedural barriers, strengthen business capability to comply with trade formalities and standards, and improve cross-border e-commerce.

ITC will carry on with its work to create a more conducive border and trade environment for women, while building the skills of Central Asian women in cross-border trade and in leadership positions. We hope the recommendations in this report will give the public and private sectors the tools they need to ensure that trade delivers for women's economic empowerment.

Pamela Coke-Hamilton
Executive Director
International Trade Centre

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- 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

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- National Association of Business Women of Tajikistan
- Tadbirkor Ayol International Business Women's Association of Uzbekistan

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Contents

Foreword	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Acronyms	vii
Executive summary	viii
CHAPTER 1 ■ Challenges and needs	
Context	2
Methodology and objective of the report	3
Trade facilitation and gender: What is the link?	3
Gender contexts across Central Asia – realities facing women	8
The needs and challenges of Central Asian women cross-border traders	13
CHAPTER 2 ■ Making borders work for women: Highlights from ITC interventions	
Gender-responsive trade facilitation training for customs officials	26
Women’s leadership in customs: Tackling gender barriers and creating change	27
Fostering women’s confidence and knowledge of trade facilitation	28
CHAPTER 3 ■ Charting a way forward	
Increase transparency in trade procedures and implement digital reforms	30
Inform gender-responsive trade policymaking	31
Create a conducive border environment to empower women traders	32
Empower women in trade and customs	34
Advance regional dialogue and gender mainstreaming	35
REFERENCES	38
ENDNOTES	41

FIGURES

Figure 1	Trade facilitation and broader policy initiatives	6
Figure 2	Impact of trade facilitation reforms on women traders	7
Figure 3	Women's political representation in parliaments as of February 2021	8
Figure 4	Constraints on women's participation in the economy	11
Figure 5	Women traders' usage rates for different modes of transportation	14
Figure 6	Financial issues faced by women traders	16
Figure 7	Challenges in accessing information faced by women traders	18
Figure 8	Women traders' perception of assistance from business associations	19
Figure 9	Survey responses from women traders on e-commerce awareness	19
Figure 10	Survey on governments' actions to recruit and retain female staff	19
Figure 11	Key infrastructure needs at border crossings identified by women traders	32
Figure 12	Training in top demand among women traders (% of survey responses)	33

TABLES

Table 1	Challenges faced by women traders	14
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Acronyms

Unless otherwise specified, all references to dollars (\$) are to United States dollars. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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
SDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
STR	Simplified trade regime
WBA	Women's business association
WTO	World Trade Organization



Executive summary

Using primary data collected from the training and surveys conducted by ITC within the framework of the Ready4Trade Central Asia project, this report investigates the main challenges and top concerns for women traders and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Central Asia. It also sheds light on the legislative and policy changes that Central Asian governments are implementing to foster equal economic participation for women in the region.

The report concludes by outlining how the Central Asian public and private sectors can collaborate to improve opportunities and mechanisms for women traders and SME owners.

Women involved in international trade face 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. As highlighted in a previous ITC publication, *WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement: A Gender Lens for Action*, the design of trade facilitation interventions often assumes equal benefits for all traders. In practice, however, women traders face unique challenges that may limit their benefits from such reforms.

Therefore, adopting gender-sensitive trade facilitation measures is crucial to generate 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 facing women traders in Central Asia

The findings from ITC surveys reveal the specific needs and challenges faced by women traders in Central Asia. These 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 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 to participate fully in cross-border trade.

ITC interventions in making borders work for women

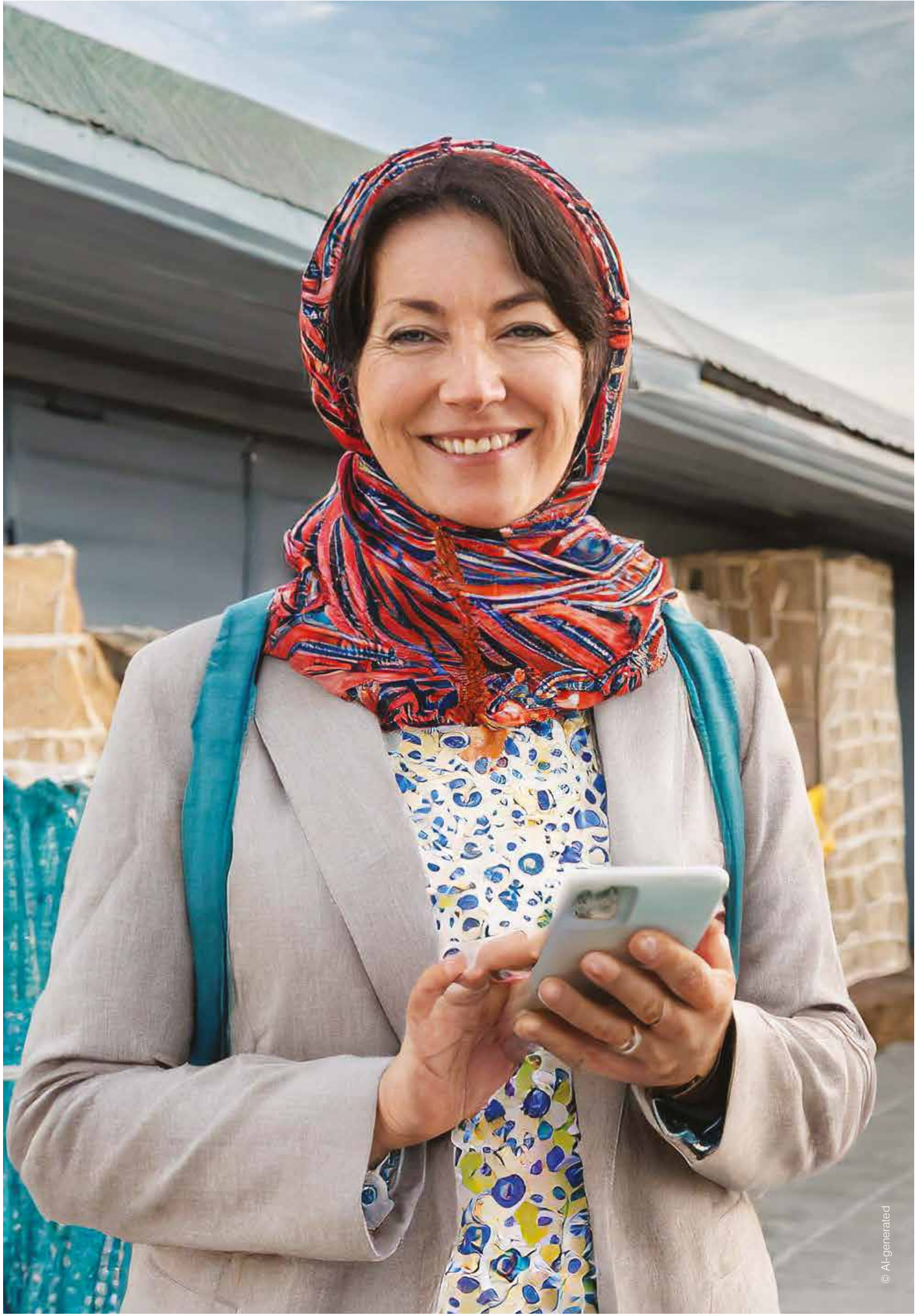
The International Trade Centre has contributed to creating a more conducive border and trade environment for women as well as building women's skills in cross-border trade and in leadership positions in Central Asia. ITC's interventions include:

- Delivering gender-responsive trade facilitation training for more than 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 to empower 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 and paperless cross-border trade solutions.
- Incorporate gender-responsive policymaking in trade facilitation reforms and budgeting, strengthening partnerships between women business associations and national trade facilitation committees, and establish gender focal points in public institutions.
- Create a conducive border environment by integrating gender-responsive infrastructure across border posts, improving gender-disaggregated trade data collection and ensuring that gender awareness initiatives for government officials are sustainable.
- Empower women in trade and customs through capacity building and financial inclusion, advancing regional dialogue and gender mainstreaming.



CHAPTER 1

Challenges and needs

Context 2

Methodology and objective of the report..... 3

Trade facilitation and gender: What is the link? 3

Gender contexts across Central Asia – realities facing women 8

The needs and challenges of Central Asian women cross-border traders 13

CHAPTER 1

Challenges and needs

Context

Firuz is an entrepreneur exporting honey and dried fruits from her country to neighbouring ones. Ordinarily, she exports small quantities and depends 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 about 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. Border clearance times increased due to the COVID-19 crisis, and she worries about the shelf life and longevity of her products while they are stuck at the border. Although Firuz 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 expand her business because she also has to take care of their children and household chores, as well as care for his ageing mother. Firuz would like training on customs procedures and general business skills development, but does not know where to access such training. As a result, she continues to operate as a small enterprise.

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 struggled to juggle impossible demands between work and home.

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

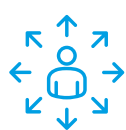
In addition, the prolonged closure of schools increased girls' chances of both teenage pregnancy and dropping out of school altogether, as well as the risk of child marriage. While some of these challenges have eased as the economic impact of the pandemic has lessened, gender inequalities remain a pervasive challenge throughout the world.

From an international trade perspective, women traders and women-owned businesses have also been dealt a cruel blow by the pandemic's economic fallout. Firuz'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 economic impact of the pandemic has highlighted continued gender disparities in all sectors and industries of the global economy, and the inadequacy of 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 contributions of informal work often go unrecognized in the formal economy.

Methodology and objective of the report

The Ready4Trade Central Asia (R4TCA) project, financed by the European Union, is part of the broader ITC mandate to support and improve the business competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It advocates improving the business environment and management of border operations through implementation of 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.

Much has been written and researched on trade facilitation issues and their impact on women traders and women-owned businesses across Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, 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. To make this a reality, ITC has worked with national governments in the region to deliver training in three key areas:

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

This report seeks to tie together the findings from the training and surveys to paint a better picture of the challenges and positive developments facing Central Asian countries as they seek to increase their participation in international trade.

Together with ITC, Central Asian governments along with customs brokers' associations and women's business associations (WBAs) have taken steps to promote 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 top challenges and most pressing concerns for women traders and SME owners in the region. It also identifies legislative and policy changes that Central Asian governments are implementing to promote women's equal economic participation in the region.

The survey was designed to identify:

- The types of businesses in which Central Asian women primarily engage, the nature of goods and volumes traded, and the modes of transportation used.
- Questions about the 'status' of their operations (i.e. formal business registration, tax payments).
- 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 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 trainings for government officials on 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 has become an integral part of policymaking. One of the most relevant areas of intervention is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG 5 aims at achieving gender equality and supporting and empowering women and girls to overcome 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 stems from 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 these policies and programmes can have on men versus women.

Women represent 50% of the world's working population, but generate only 37% of global gross domestic product.

Annual gross domestic product would climb by \$28 trillion (26%) in 2025 if women played the same role in labour markets as men.

Source: McKinsey, World Bank, OECD.

In other words, gender mainstreaming recognizes 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).

ITC surveyed the following target groups:



1,506
women traders



52
business and civil
society organizations



32
Government agencies
and NTFCs

Historically, it was believed that trade was gender-neutral and that trade policies and decisions affected 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 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.

In 2017, 127 WTO member states and observers at the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference signed the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment (the Buenos Aires Declaration). This declaration 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 reducing poverty (WTO, 2017).

The Buenos Aires Declaration upholds the need to develop evidence-based policies and 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 gender-mainstreaming 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. 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 they do not remain trapped in low-paying and low-skill jobs (von Hagen, 2014). Trade can either be a catalyst for gender equality or an intensifier of existing gender inequalities.

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

Policymakers should therefore strive to avoid two common tendencies when using gender analysis and mainstreaming gender in trade-related initiatives:

- Tacking gender-specific considerations on as an afterthought, without appropriate integration into the design of policies and support programmes.
- 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).

In certain areas, trade policies can play an important, supportive role for more inclusive outcomes and help ensure that discriminatory side effects do not occur. For example, some countries use more 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, for example, 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 and the Canada–Israel FTA both contain dedicated gender and trade chapters.

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

Similarly, a national trade policy of Rwanda's places social development and gender equality as 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 certain processes related to importing and exporting. It 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 targets 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 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:

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

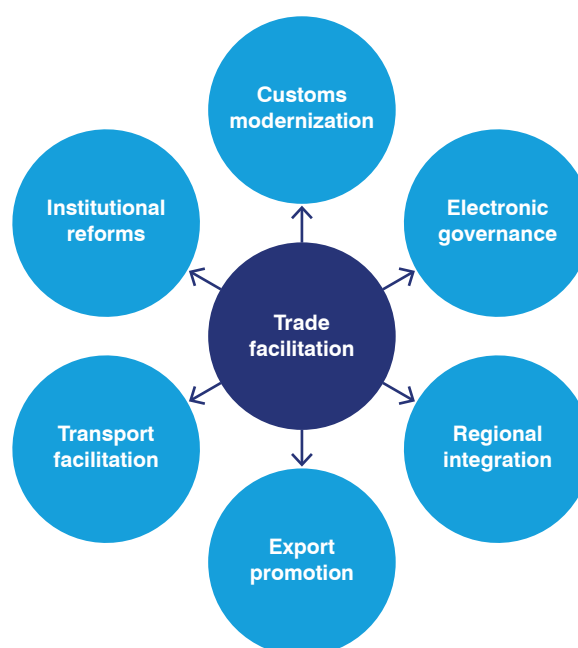


- Lack of information is a major barrier for women-owned SMEs and small-scale traders.
- Customs officials may lack knowledge of the rules to assist women traders or have biases against them.
- The absence of automation of trade facilitation requirements exposes women traders to higher levels of abuse and corruption at borders (Singh & Lepillez, 2020).
- 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.

In turn, trade facilitation reforms can be a major boon for women-led businesses and specific gender-sensitive interventions when implementing trade facilitation reforms can generate even greater benefits.

Including 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 simplified trade regimes) can greatly help women who live near border crossings and engage in informal cross-border trade, as well as women-owned businesses and small businesses. Trade facilitation reforms that reduce fees and charges at the border benefit their bottom line, while better transparency in regulations on importing and exporting procedures can improve access to information for women-owned businesses (Korinek et al., 2021).

Figure 1 Trade facilitation and broader policy initiatives



Source: Authors

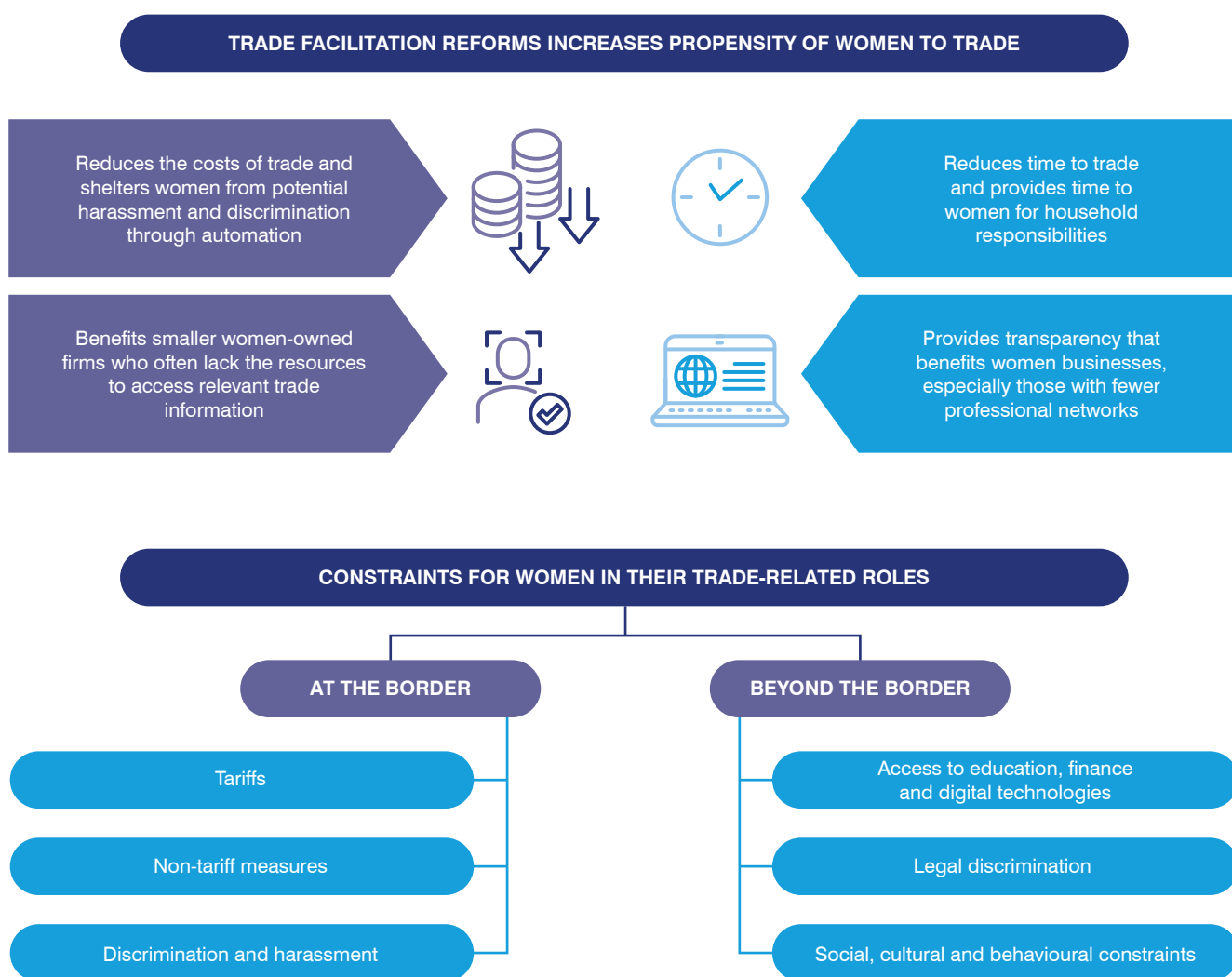
Export promotion agencies can also support women entrepreneurs in accessing international markets, increasing their capacity to export by supporting networking activities and providing them with market information to overcome knowledge gaps (Korinek et al., 2021).

Improvements to both hard and soft infrastructure (improved lighting, sanitation facilities plus 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.

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 more revenue for governments through tax collection, and offering simplified customs procedures to traders, who can plan and budget for cross-border trade activities (United States Agency for International Development, 2018).

In much of the world, informal cross-border trade is undertaken by women traders and so STRs, as a policy instrument, benefit them directly. Trade information desk officers at border posts are tasked with assisting women traders with border clearance procedures as well as sharing information with traders and small businesses.

Figure 2 Impact of trade facilitation reforms on women traders



Source: World Bank Group and WTO (2020).

While aggregate benefits from trade can be positive, localized costs can negatively affect women depending on their roles in the economy, their skills, their location/place of work and the sectors in which they work. Women face a combination of at-the-border and behind-the-border barriers when engaging in international trade. In the context of trade facilitation, women traders tend to be concentrated in the informal sector or they operate SMEs, owing to greater household responsibilities than men and limited time to dedicate to business activities.

At the same time, women often have insufficient access to financing to grow their enterprises and they lack 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 essential is collection of gender-disaggregated data for both the public and the private sector. All the above measures are necessary to enhance and facilitate women's participation in international trade.

The following section presents an overview of the gender context in each Central Asian country and their efforts to improve gender parity and cross-border trade management, and enhance women's participation in the economy.

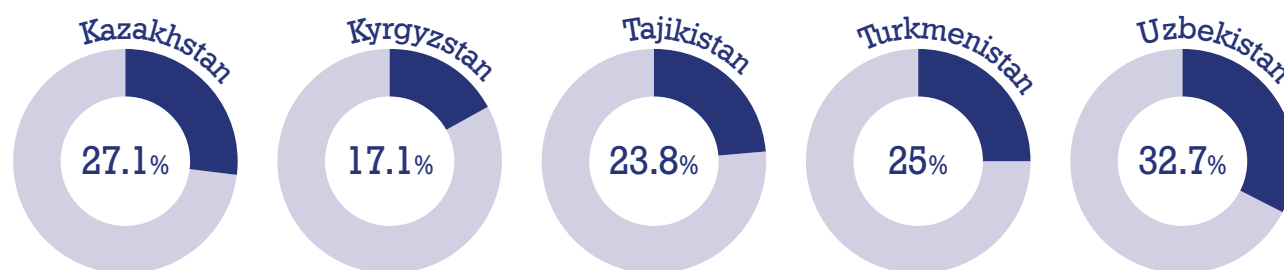
Gender contexts across Central Asia – realities facing women

Central Asia is a heterogeneous region, characterized by very different economies: exporters of natural resources Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, relatively industrialized Uzbekistan, agriculture-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 and provide a snapshot of the socioeconomic realities facing women in each country. This will shed light on why women continue to face trade-specific challenges in the region.

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

Figure 3 Women's political representation in parliaments as of February 2021



Source: UN Women, 2022.

Uzbekistan's Action Strategy for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2017–2021 (Muratalieva, 2022) emphasized the social sphere, supporting greater 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.

Today, efforts are under way to improve 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 in 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).

Gender equality in Kyrgyzstan 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 considerable 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 COVID-19 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 focus on service provision rather than decision-making at a policy level, and therefore are unable to meaningfully influence policy 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 limited participation of women in politics and as political decision makers (see Figure 3) means it is tougher to target (and implement) gender-based reforms that challenge cultural norms.

While countries may make constitutional provisions for equality before the law for men and women, societal practices need to change as well. Challenges in this regard are not unique to Central Asia; 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).

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

In Kazakhstan, on the other hand, there are no public reports of discriminatory practices towards women in relation to inheritance of property and land (OECD, 2019b). Still, gender stereotypes about the economic roles of men and women – and men as the family heads and breadwinners – persist (Grieg et al., 2019). Issues such as bridal kidnapping, patriarchal-dominated inheritance practices and domestic violence are largely viewed as household issues and persist despite legislative provisions to the contrary (OECD, 2019f, 2019c).

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



Only one-third of women in Central Asia are entrepreneurs, and their remuneration rate is 30% less than that of their male peers (Chernyshevskaja et al., n.d.).

In Kyrgyzstan, for example, assets and property are more often registered in the name of men – for instance, just 29% of real estate is registered in the name of women (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2016). This means 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 these loans are for lower amounts and carry higher interest rates.

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

Only 30% of Kyrgyz women are entrepreneurs, compared with 70% of men. Around 90% of women's capital is concentrated in the field of micro and small business, where there are high risks of capital loss (UN Women, 2022).

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

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

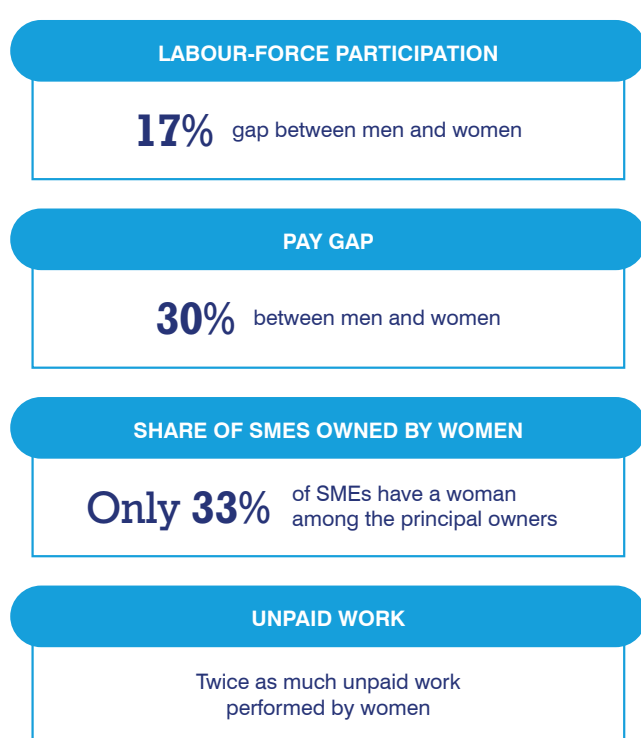
For the other countries, however, women's economic participation is less positive. Women in Turkmenistan participate far less in the labour force than men – 41.9% compared with 78.2% (2017 data), which is the largest gender gap in labour-force participation in the region (Holzhacker & Skakova, 2019). Data from 2018 show that Kyrgyz women's participation in the labour force is only 56% compared with 80% for men (United Nations Development Programme Kyrgyzstan, 2018).

In Tajikistan, women's rate of participation in the labour force declined from 46% to 27% between 2003 and 2013. Their ability to participate in the economy was hindered by child-rearing duties, the high prevalence of increased remittances and fewer employment opportunities (World Bank Group, 2018).

Care responsibilities that consume many hours of the day also hamper the ability of women to build their firms. The amount of time spent on unpaid labour (i.e. household work) is quite high across the region, reducing the amount of time that could be spent in the formal economy and/or growing their businesses. Women in Kyrgyzstan, for example, can spend up to 4.5 hours a day on household chores (Asian Development Bank, 2019), while Tajik women spend up to four hours a day on such activities.¹



Figure 4 Constraints on women's participation in the economy



Source: UN women, World Bank statistics

Care work and economic constraints, coupled with the absence of social protection networks (such as affordable childcare options), have 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 more flexibility but lower salaries (OECD, 2019a).

ITC DATA SHOW THAT...

29%

of women say they trade informally

57%

of these women have fewer than 10 employees in the company

Gender-based gaps in sectors are also rooted in segregationist education policies that deem some occupations 'suitable' for women and others – construction and mining, for example – unsuitable.

Through their 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 and f).

ITC DATA SHOW 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

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 people under 18 years of age (OECD, 2019c).

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) 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).

Women traders list customary law and gender stereotypes as the top societal reasons they cannot expand their businesses internationally.

ITC DATA SHOW THAT...

Women traders typically operate as microenterprises (employing 10 or fewer people) or as sole traders

48%

trade formally

34%

manage informal business operations + trade informally

Luckily, change is on the way. Similar restrictions used to exist in Kazakhstan, but the Government has removed restrictions on employment for women. The Labour Code – which previously barred women from working 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).²

Similarly, Uzbekistan lifted its ban on female labour participation in specific industries and professions in May 2019, 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 trade internationally, 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 Central Asian women cross-border traders

ITC has worked with Central Asian governments, WBAs and customs brokers' associations since 2020 to conduct interviews and extensive surveys to better understand the difficulties 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 face challenges that governments would do well both to heed and to improve by implementing measures.

It should be noted that the findings are a snapshot from just 1,500 interviewees. Nevertheless, the survey findings not only provide an accurate reflection of on-the-ground realities for these women, but are also a vital 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 traders³

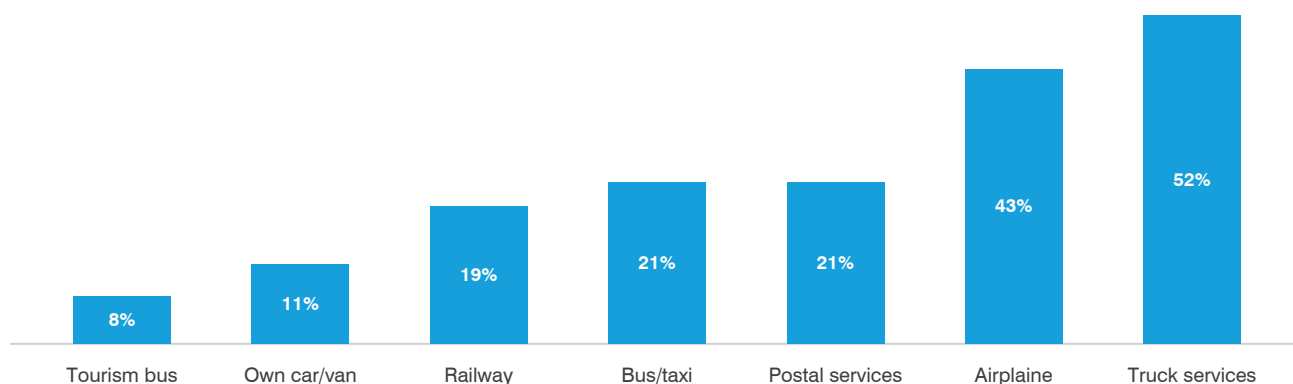
The survey reveals that most women (70% of participants) live in urban areas, are married or divorced, and engage in small-scale cross-border trade. Interestingly, the largest age group participating in cross-border trade is 45 years or older (39% of participants); 81% of them own smartphones (with daily internet access ranking at 71%) and 58% 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)⁴ and/or are self-employed. Many (53% of those surveyed) use 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 rank as the top three export partners),⁵ although there is interest to expand operations into Europe, with the correct support.

Across the region, 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.⁶ Where border processes can be improved, many interviewees consider such improvements to be gender-neutral, without necessarily accounting for women-specific challenges. This is now changing – gender-sensitive reforms are under way throughout the region.
- Although not unique to Central Asian countries, national trade facilitation committees (NTFCs) do not always account for gender mainstreaming in customs and cross-border trade issues.
- Based on ITC findings, customs clearances are not problem-free: on average, it takes two to 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 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 that prevent women traders and businesses from expanding.⁷
- Women traders often lack access to information and are unaware of processes and tools for business support.⁸ Training and information sharing are therefore critical to update women on new regulatory requirements and processes and to help them formalize their business practices.

Figure 5 Women traders’ usage rates for different modes of transportation



Source: ITC survey of women traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options

Women traders and business associations have somewhat different perceptions about what prevents women traders in the region from accessing international markets, survey findings show.

Business associations rank government officials’ engagement with traders, unfriendly and cumbersome

border processes, and insufficient time to access relevant information required to trade as the top three challenges. Women traders themselves⁹ rated cumbersome regulations and procedures at customs as the top obstacle, followed by requirements for obtaining certifications and authorizations, and limited access to timely and easily understood information. More information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Challenges faced by women traders

CHALLENGE IDENTIFIED	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS
Cumbersome regulations and procedures at customs (e.g. long processing times at the border)	45%
High requirements to obtain certifications/authorizations (e.g. obtaining export permits, sanitary and phytosanitary compliance)	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)	22%

Source: ITC surveys of women traders and business associations.

Interestingly, the survey findings reveal that the bottom three concerns differ from those found in other parts of the world – for example, in African countries. The bottom three concerns of the Central Asian women entrepreneurs and traders who were surveyed 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.¹⁰



Findings from the 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 participate fully in cross-border trade. These challenges are discussed in more detail below.



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

Across the region, gender mainstreaming is a top-down affair. In fact, up to 75% of surveyed trade-related agencies in Central Asia do not integrate gender analysis and indicators in their work.

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 genderspecific matters in staff training

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

46%

Some stakeholders have indicated little grass-roots participation or involvement from the business sector in preparing legislation – as was the case with Turkmenistan's National Action Plan on Gender Equality¹¹ – or even awareness of gender-specific legislation, as with Kyrgyzstan's National Strategy on Gender Equality 2020.¹²

The quality of support available to women in their various roles in the economy requires that policymakers 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 so all government departments can account for gender mainstreaming in their daily activities.

For example, stakeholders report that field officers are not always aware of changes in duties and regulations, and executing officers sometimes do not have all the correct information at hand. Gender sensitization of government officials is therefore critical to ensure awareness and implementation of policies, especially where they have a gender-based angle.¹³

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.

Until recently, the absence of both data and the collection of data on cross-border trade meant that policymakers struggled to understand on-the-ground realities and challenges and to devise laws and support programmes that could further women's participation in trade.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵



There are few women policymakers in the region, so their role in reforming trade facilitation is limited.

Up to 69% of surveyed women said they were not consulted on proposed changes to official procedures,¹⁶ while 42% do not participate in meetings on proposed legislative reforms – although they indicated they would like to do so, if invited.

'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.'

ITC survey participant

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.

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 SHOW THAT...

79%

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

Only 51%

feel that their recommendations are taken into consideration

54%

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

Only 48%

said that information on official border regulations is easily accessible

Data gathered from the surveys 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 NTFs and other platforms for public-private dialogue, as well as surveys and other mechanisms to collect feedback.

Women entrepreneurs and traders in Central Asian countries are not alone in struggling to access financing sources. Like women in many developing countries, those across the region face difficulties including the absence of collateral and lack of a credit track record sufficient to secure loans. These are respectively ranked as the biggest and second-biggest challenges to obtaining credit.¹⁷



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

Figure 6 Financial issues faced by women traders



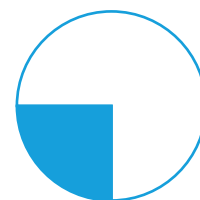
Only 25%
of women traders
have a bank account



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



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



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

Source: ITC survey

In 2017, for example, almost 60% of women in the region had no bank account (OECD, 2021). Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have the widest gender gaps in financial inclusion among the five Central Asian countries. The 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 protection via financial savings.¹⁸

Limited access to credit and trade finance is deemed the top challenge impeding the ability of businesswomen to expand into global markets.

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



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

The lack of timely access to regulations, cross-border trade requirements and market access requirements is a huge hindrance to women traders' ability to expand into international markets.

Findings from the ITC surveys illustrate that women traders are not well-informed about changes to business procedures and relevant legislation, with most (62%) learning about these changes after implementation has taken place

Most Central Asian governments publish proposed legislative changes on official websites. However, more efforts can be made to distribute information on legal amendments through consultations with businesses and sending handouts with easy guidelines to WBAs and industry associations.¹⁹

Such measures would help ensure that women traders obtain the correct information, especially as findings show that they rely mainly (46%) on personal networks and word of mouth to obtain information on border processes and markets.²⁰

Surveyed 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. 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.

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



Figure 7 Challenges in accessing information faced by women traders



Source: ITC survey

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

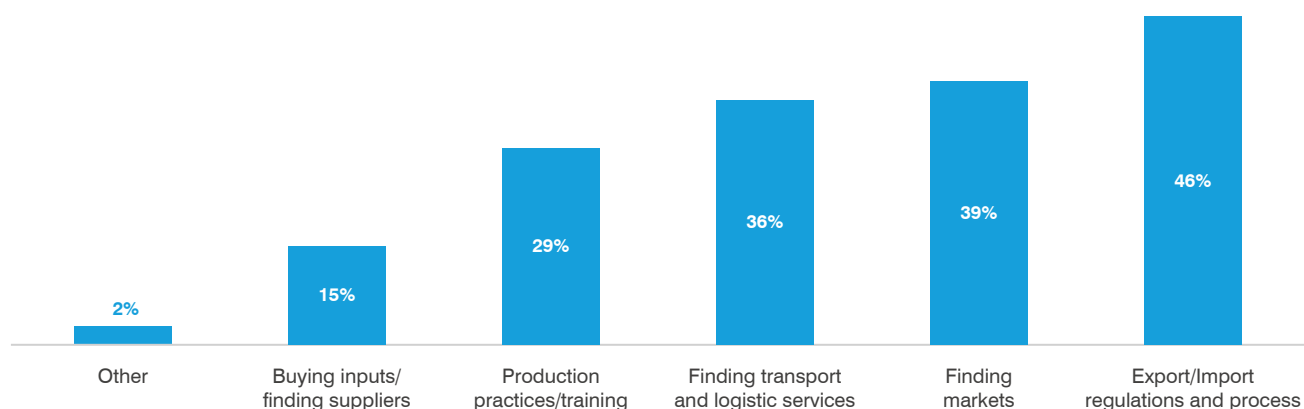
Business chambers, export agencies and private associations across the region can play important roles in helping their SME members gain better access to international markets. Where possible, they can also collaborate with women’s businesses to achieve the economies of scale necessary to meet exporting requirements, with support of this nature already under way (see Figure 8).²¹

Just 35% of surveyed women reported receiving training on trade and business skills. Yet demand for this type of training (especially for cross-border trade) is high:

90% of women surveyed by ITC reported that training on trade procedures and advocacy, as well as on entrepreneurial skills, would greatly benefit their businesses.

The survey also demonstrates that training and capacity building should go beyond traditional areas – into areas such as digital trade.

Figure 8 Women traders' perception of assistance from business associations



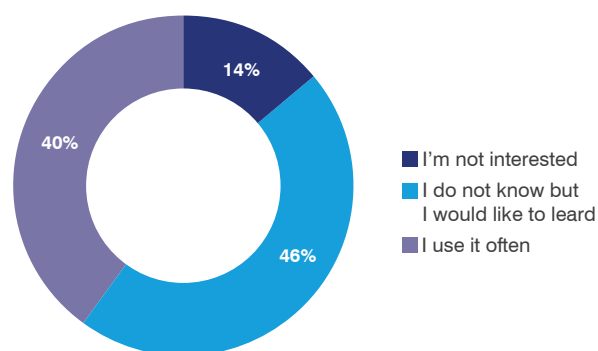
Source: ITC survey of women traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital trade and digitization for both governments and businesses. While there has been a global trend to increase 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.

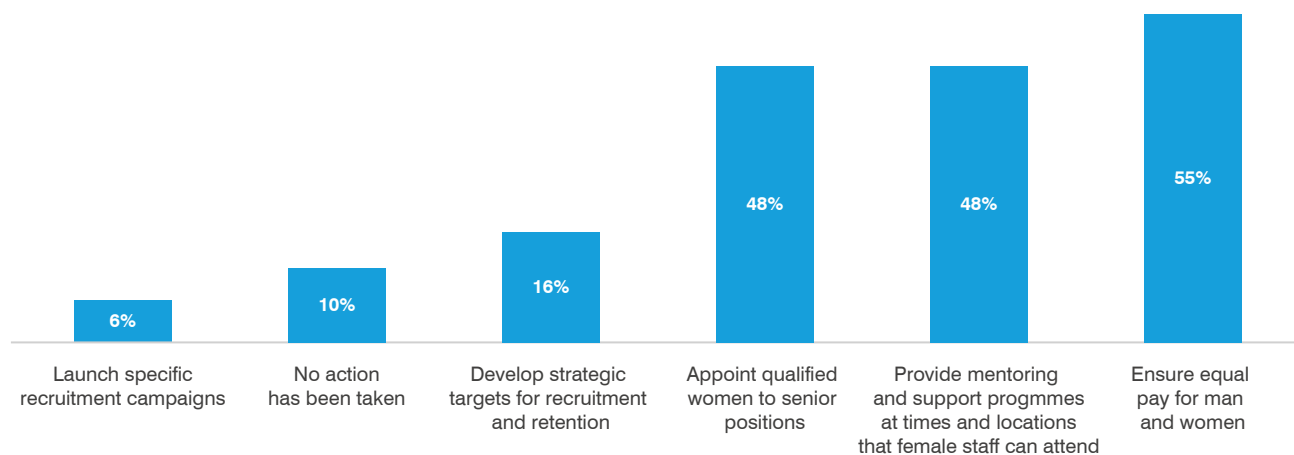
Lastly, **SMEs said a centralized, online system that trained women entrepreneurs and provided information on international trade procedures, and helped with tax and customs requirements**, would enable them to understand how to trade internationally.²²

Figure 9 Survey responses from women traders on e-commerce awareness



Source: ITC survey of women traders

Figure 10 Survey on governments' actions to recruit and retain female staff



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



There are signs of positive change

Kyrgyzstan's National Strategy for Gender Equality 2020 focuses on women's economic empowerment in non-traditional sectors. It contains provisions 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, which will become a dialogue platform between the state, business and civil society.

With support from UN Women, Kazakhstan has begun to roll out appropriate training to local governments (Economic Research Institute, 2020).

Tajikistan's National Development Strategy 2030 call 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 owners.

ITC has trained women entrepreneurs and traders – 350 to date – on customs legislation, regulatory frameworks for trade, and rules and obligations for engaging in cross-border trade.

ITC surveys²³ show that Central Asian governments are working actively to recruit female staff into policymaking and management positions (see Figure 10). 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 before gender mainstreaming is fully implemented, including women as part of policymaking is a significant step forward to address gender imbalances.

To this end, Uzbekistan shows regional leadership via its commitment to more than double the number of women employees in customs authorities (currently 8%) between 2022 and 2024.²⁴ The country also has more than 375 women customs officials, including 24 who are in leadership positions, 87 in central management and, notably, 25 in positions associated with foreign economic activity.

Furthermore, 240 women employees are stationed at border customs posts. This is an important step towards ensuring a more women-friendly approach is supported at border crossings.

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

Over the past few years, governments in Central Asia have taken major steps to improve trade facilitation requirements and processes in 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.

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.

The most notable current efforts 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.²⁵

Since July 2021, Uzbekistan has been taking proactive steps to simplify customs administration and procedures to widen access to export markets for businesswomen engaged in cross-border trade.²⁶ 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 Uzbek 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 companies, officials and customs specialists on how to use it (<https://www.swcustoms.tj>).²⁷

This is a noteworthy step forward in improving Tajikistan's 'doing business' conditions. 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. WBAs were invited to join the Committee in 2023.

In Kyrgyzstan, interviewees highlighted the improvement of the digital tax service, which has become more user-friendly for women traders and improved overall provision of customs services.²⁸ The country has begun to implement various border reforms. These include a single-window system as well as a trade facilitation roadmap for 2021–2025 that aims to improve the existing regulatory framework and enhance digitalization of procedures, promote sustainable trade facilitation measures and simplify trade procedures.

A key priority in Kyrgyzstan is the digitalization 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 joined the Framework Agreement on Facilitating Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific to advance digital and paperless cross-border trade (Haidar & Kulbatyrov, 2023). Key recent advancements in trade facilitation 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, greatly 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, the country 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 has noted significant progress by Turkmenistan to adapt its procedures to international standards. This 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 launched the integrated Automated System for Customs Data, known as ASYCUDA, and single-window implementation is also under way.

At the regional level

The Central Asia Gateway trade information portal was launched in all the region's countries in May 2023. Combining information from the countries' trade facilitation portals, this 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 services more than 160,000 users.

The portal was also used to establish simplification roadmaps in Central Asian countries. It has helped to implement more than 40 detailed recommendations to smoothen cross-border trade.

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

Programmes and initiatives to support women in trade and in customs services are 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 the programme Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions. It aims to promote women's empowerment and gender equality among Uzbek government agencies.

The State Customs Committee was the first public institution in Uzbekistan to embrace the programme – the first of its kind in Central Asia (United Nations Development Programme Uzbekistan, 2022).

Tajikistan has had a Task Force on Women Entrepreneurship Support since 2014 that seeks to support women entrepreneurs to lobby and advocate for their interests. It provides a platform for public-private dialogue and a forum to discuss 'doing business' concerns. The task force also provides an avenue for women entrepreneurs to lobby the government about their problems through the Secretariat of the Presidential Advisory Council of the Republic of Tajikistan.

The task force is one of the most successful platforms for public–private dialogue between WBAs and the government. For example, it 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 the task force’s advocacy efforts, mentions access to finance for women with disabilities as well as a reduction in the percentage tax rate for women entrepreneurs (Bennett et al., 2019).²⁹

Uzbekistan has created women’s entrepreneurship centres to create an enabling environment for women’s entrepreneurship. These provide employment assistance, retrain women who have been out of the workplace for an extended period and help women start their own businesses and develop their business management skills (LexUZ On-line, 2019). These measures complement the government efforts to strengthen vocational training and assist women with access to equipment, technology, business space, financial assistance and partners for entrepreneurial development.

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

Gaizamira Victorovna, ITC workshop participant

In November 2021, Kazakhstan launched the first of its resource centres (the government aims to launch 16 centres) designed to offer women entrepreneurs 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.³⁰

Programme priorities include providing equal access to financial instruments and lending, creating a competitive regulatory environment and reducing administrative barriers and costs for women entrepreneurs.

Positive inroads are also 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 region³¹ show that training and capacity building is their primary offering – with the top three trainings on business skills, production practice and product diversification, and market compliance. Greater outreach by business associations to women traders and entrepreneurs would help bridge knowledge gaps in the region.



CHAPTER 2

Making borders work for women: Highlights from ITC interventions

Gender-responsive trade facilitation training for customs officials 26

Women’s leadership in customs: Tackling gender barriers and creating change..... 27

Fostering women’s confidence and knowledge of trade facilitation 28

CHAPTER 2

Making borders work for women: Highlights from ITC interventions

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 began 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 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 delivered capacity-building sessions under ITC supervision to more than 650 border officials across the 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 participants reported gender-responsive changes in border operations. For example, among 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 said they better understood their wives and offered 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.



Women's leadership in customs: Tackling gender barriers and creating change

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

The State Customs Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan and ITC collaborated to support women in customs to expand professionally. 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.

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

Training programme participant

The programme was well-received by participants, who praised its focus on soft skills and leadership development. They requested more trainings and individual coaching sessions 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.'

Training programme participant

One participant said: '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 entrepreneurs in Central Asia want to expand their businesses and reach new international markets. As noted previously, ITC survey findings showed a strong demand for gender-focused training on cross-border trade.

To respond to that call, 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.

'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.'

Gaizamira Victorovna, Training programme participant

More than 350 women attended the workshops, which targeted 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 training, women shared positive feedback and requested more training on these topics. Some of their comments follow:

'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, Tajikistan.

'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, Kazakhstan.

'Once my shipment was stuck for five months and 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, Entrepreneur, Argin and Co. (supplier of fabrics from Italy).

CHAPTER 3

Charting a way forward

- Increase transparency in trade procedures and implement digital reforms 30
- Inform gender-responsive trade policymaking 31
- Create a conducive border environment to empower women traders 32
- Empower women in trade and customs..... 34
- Advance regional dialogue and gender mainstreaming 35

CHAPTER 3

Charting a way forward

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

These recommendations are based on insights gleaned from interviews, surveys and training outcomes of the R4TCA project

Increase transparency in trade procedures and implement digital reforms

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

Government institutions ranked transparent access to information as the best way to support women traders. The launch of the Central Asia Gateway information portal was a major step to make cross-border trade data accessible. This type of trade information portal is designed to make information on cross-border trade requirements accessible and transparent.

In addition to digital access to information, it is essential to establish low-threshold, in-person information desks at border crossing points, offering women traders easy access to information on key issues such as their rights, border crossing times, fees and formalities.³²

Continuous efforts are needed 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.

Consider adopting simplified trade regimes to support smoother and easier cross-border trade for women and SME owners³³

Introducing a simplified trade regime (STR) harmonized across borders in the region will facilitate smoother cross-border trade for women traders and SME owners. These regimes 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 support improved intraregional cross-border trade, enabling policymakers to better collect gender-disaggregated trade data and further streamline processes for small traders in the 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.

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

The digitization of customs procedures is a critical advancement, especially for small-scale traders, including women. By eliminating reliance on paper copies and boosting women traders' awareness of 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, avoiding complexities and delays at border crossings.

When implementing 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. The active deployment of measures such as advance ruling and pre-arrival processing would benefit women traders, improving their access to digitalization and expediting cargo release.

Comprehensive training for trade information desk officers should also be provided so they can use digital systems effectively. Equipped with expertise, they can provide women traders with invaluable guidance and support to navigate digital procedures and requirements.

Inform gender-responsive trade policymaking

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 better government-private sector relations, but also facilitates invaluable feedback loops, giving officials insights into gender-sensitive enhancements for border processes, customs and trade facilitation.

Integrating WBAs into 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.

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's affairs departments tend to prioritize service provision, sidelining decision-making and policy influence in 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. Including gender focal points within entities such as customs, ministries of trade and NTFCs would be a major step. 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 that 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.

Introduce gender-responsive budgeting to turn policy into meaningful impact

Gender-responsive budgeting will ensure that policies can be implemented because suitable 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 (which often knows and understands local constituents' needs better) and business associations and chambers should all play a part in helping to implement targeted support programmes designed to enhance women's participation in trade. This will ensure a public–private partnership to support implementation of these policies in real ways.

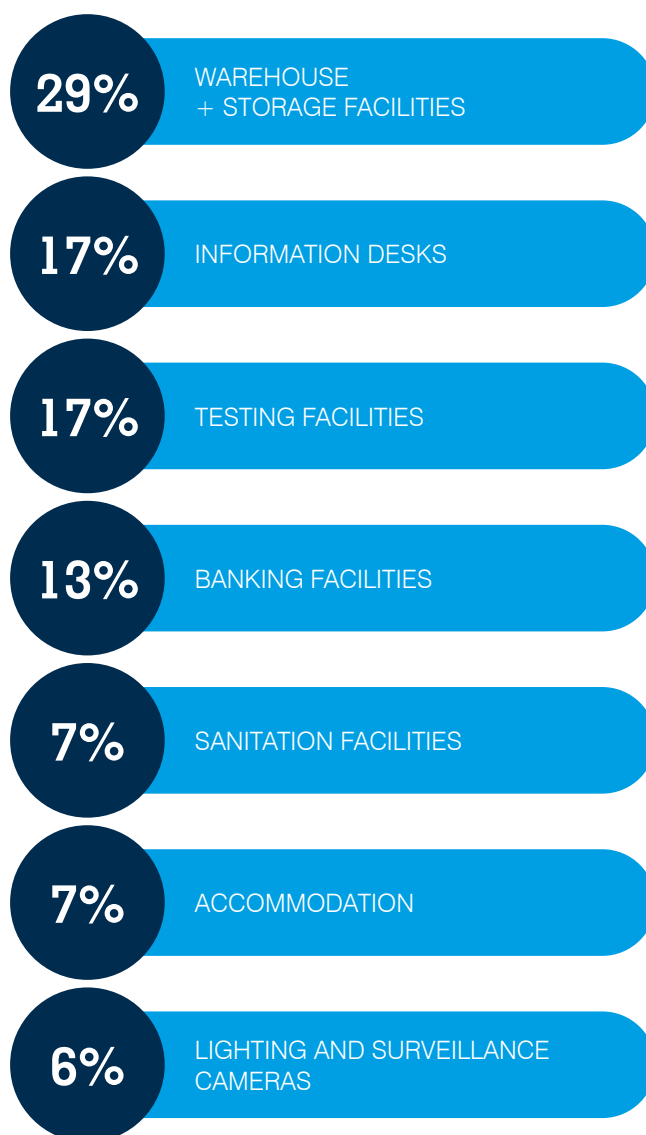
Create a conducive border environment to empower women traders

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 were deemed the top three essential amenities at border crossings.

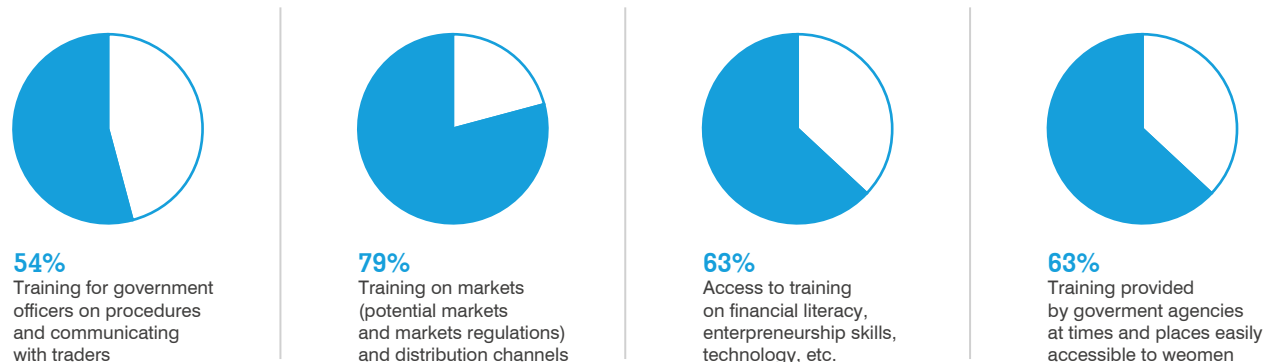
The availability of these resources ranks as the second most impactful assistance for women traders. Implementing gender-sensitive infrastructure adjustments aligns with fostering a conducive trading environment that empowers and supports women traders in the region. Figure 11 provides more details.

Figure 11 Key infrastructure needs at border crossings identified by women traders



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

Figure 12 Training in top demand among women traders (% of survey responses)



Source: ITC survey of women traders with the ability to include multiple-choice options.

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

Effective data collection is essential to better understand the challenges facing women traders and to create strategies to foster an enabling trade environment. Border regulatory agencies should explore ways to gather gender-disaggregated data on 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 lead to better use of data. Shared data can enhance insights across agencies and can 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.

Sustain and strengthen gender-responsive awareness initiatives for government officials

Building on the success of gender-responsive trade facilitation training for border officials in Central Asia, there is potential to expand these sessions to a wider spectrum of officials in various government agencies. Continuously reinforcing the importance 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 effective. Similarly, introducing dedicated training for hotline and desk operators can improve 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

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 (e.g. customs brokers' associations, WBAs) can play a key role in helping women traders understand cross-border trade requirements, international markets and technological advancements, and gain financial literacy.

Focusing on export regulations for handmade items, such as crafts and textiles, would greatly benefit women as they are often involved in these industries. Training in confidence-building and advocacy is 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 so they can improve their practices. They also highlighted the value of regular training sessions and information-sharing with government officials. Sensitizing officials to provide such awareness-raising support is crucial.

Enhance financial inclusion for women traders and SME owners

Ensuring equitable access to affordable credit is vital to empower women traders. Simplified financing mechanisms and greater 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 promotes economic empowerment, bridging the gender gap and propelling the growth of women-led businesses in the region.

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. Adopting 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 inspire and motivate the younger generation of women leaders to believe in their capacity for change and progress.

It is also essential to proactively create initiatives to attract young women to the trade industry, enabling them to explore 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 central components.

Several WBAs, customs brokers' associations and state customs committees in Central Asia 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.

Participating in, organizing and promoting regional and international events focusing on exchanging best practices for women's inclusion in trade can also yield valuable synergies. Establishing a Central Asian 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 encourages a more inclusive and prosperous trade environment across the region.



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- 3 ITC survey of women traders.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Insights from various interviews conducted across the five Central Asian countries.
- 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 of 1,506 surveyed women traders completed this part of the questionnaire.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Interviews with Turkmen stakeholders, September 2020.
- 12 Interviews with Kyrgyz stakeholders, August 2020.
- 13 Interviews with Turkmen 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.
- 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.
- 19 ITC mainly surveyed customs and related agencies, the NTFC and standards institutions on this topic.
- 20 ITC survey of women traders.
- 21 ITC survey of women traders.
- 22 Interviews with Kyrgyz stakeholders (women-owned businesses and business associations), August 2020
- 23 On this subject, ITC surveyed predominantly customs and related agencies, NTFCs and standards institutions.
- 24 President of Uzbekistan's statement at a meeting on transforming the customs service into a corruption-free system, 17 February 2022.
- 25 On this subject, ITC surveyed mainly customs and related agencies, NTFCs and standards institutions.
- 26 Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of 8 July 2021 'On additional measures to further simplify Customs administration and procedures'.
- 27 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.
- 28 Interviews with Kyrgyz stakeholders, August 2020.
- 29 Interview with Ms. Manuchehra Majonova, Head of the Task Force on Women Entrepreneurship Support.
- 30 Programme to Support and Develop Women's Entrepreneurship in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022–2026.
- 31 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.
- 32 International Trade Centre (2023). WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement: A gender lens for action, ITC, Geneva.
- 33 Interviews with Turkmen stakeholders, September 2020.

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