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Future challenges in trade facilitation and electronic business

Briefing note on the contribution of UN/CEFACT to UN Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Summary

The Agenda for Sustainable Development with its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, will guide the work of the United Nations and its Member States over the coming years. This briefing note discusses why gender matters for trade and how the integration of the gender dimension into trade facilitation can help attain Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. It provides an insight into how the work of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT), aimed at eliminating gender disparities, will increase the gains that can be harnessed from trade facilitation in terms of international trade opportunities, countries’ competitiveness and sustainable economic growth.

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1. Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it is also crucial to enhancing sustainable development. It has been proven that empowering women and girls has a multiplier effect, and helps to drive economic growth and development across the board. Gender equality lies at the heart of the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” is about women and girls enjoying equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as having the same opportunities as men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels.¹

2. Gender equality has advanced in recent decades and women are increasingly involved in the market economy. Nevertheless, it remains a persistent challenge for countries worldwide, and the lack of gender equality is a major obstacle to the achievement of full human potential and to sustainable development. A World Bank survey of 143 economies shows that 90 per cent have at least one policy that differentiates between men and women in terms of their treatment and rights; 28 of them have ten or more legal differences for men and women, including inequities in registering a business, travelling outside the country, inheriting, owning land or other productive assets, and opening a bank account². At the same time, particularly in developing economies, women remain the predominant dealers and marketers of agricultural, aquacultural and artisanal industry in domestic markets, while long-distance trade that involves relatively capital-intensive techniques and higher profit margins, is carried out mainly by men.

3. In cross-border activities, women face multiple constraints such as access to assets, access to the top management and technical levels, access to professional training, salary inequalities, higher security protection requirements as well as unequal gender classified tariffs. In addition, for economic and other reasons, women are often pushed into informal cross-border trade with all of the disadvantages that this implies. These inequalities reduce the number of women that participate in activities related to trade facilitation such as trading, cross-border management, transportation, logistics chain management, infrastructures, information and communication technology (ICT), advisory services, etc.

4. Women also lack balanced gender representation in public institutions related to trade, such as, ministries, chambers of commerce, industrial associations, national trade facilitation bodies, and standards and technical committees. This is not only a barrier to addressing discrimination in the labor market, it also limits the mechanisms to design policies that are aimed at reducing gender gaps in international trade.

5. In terms of standard setting for trade, standards are generally presumed to be gender-neutral and are developed without recognizing the differences between male and female standard users. Prevailing gender norms present barriers to women’s participation in the development of standards, which in turn generates a lack of explicit gender policies and implementation strategies in standards setting organizations.

6. Guiding women in understanding trade procedures, setting guidelines for standards bodies to ensure a more balanced representation of the interests of women and men, promoting participation and decision-making of women in trade facilitation and standards related activities, could have an enormous impact in increasing exports and enabling women to achieve higher income levels. For this reason, a discussion on the gender dimension in trade facilitation and standardization is of major importance for gender

¹ “The United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development”, United Nations, (2015).

² “Women, Business and The Law 2016: Getting to Equal”, *World Bank*, (2015).

mainstreaming in trade, for attaining the gender related targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and particularly to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality.

7. To support trade expansion and competitiveness, as well as gender equality, trade policies and initiatives should take gender-related constraints and effects into account. Failing to do so will not only undermine improvements in gender equality, but also the productivity and growth potential of the economy.

8. The United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) is committed to contributing to the achievement of the SDG 5 on gender equality. The work of UN/CEFACT focuses on the simplification, standardization and harmonization of trade procedures and associated information flows, which are required for moving goods from seller to buyer and for making payments. The implementation of UN/CEFACT recommendations and standards helps countries to engage in and benefit from global, efficient and cost-effective trade. These benefits involve achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, for example, through supporting equal access to economic resources, financial services and technology as well as equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in trade.

9. UN/CEFACT deliverables supporting the elimination of gender disparities will increase the gains from trade facilitation in terms of enhanced international trade opportunities, countries' competitiveness and economic growth. Existing relevant recommendations and e-business standards have helped in increasing transparency of trade rules and procedures and reducing costs for trade transactions. Some examples include the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Recommendation n°1: Layout Key for Trade Documents; UNECE Recommendations n°33, n°34 and n°35 on Single Window; Business Process Analysis guidelines; Standards, models and data formats for Electronic Data Interchange for Administration, Commerce and Transport (UN/EDIFACT); and the United Nations Code for Trade and Transport Locations (UN/LOCODE). In addition to these, targeted deliverables for SDG 5 include:

- The UN/CEFACT “Women in Trade Facilitation” project: This project produced a White Paper, which identifies the multiple dimensions of gender discrimination in trade facilitation and discusses ways to reduce gender inequalities in trade procedures. In this regard, the paper describes the state of gender issues in trade facilitation, provides case-study examples and guidance to ensure gender mainstreaming that implies the development of relevant policies, implementation strategies and tools. It also suggests that new gender-differentiated metrics must be developed in order to measure the gender impact on trade facilitation and to address the disadvantages that women suffer in the trade sector. The project analyses and conclusions provide a basis for the production of a UNECE recommendation on Women in Trade Facilitation.
- The UN/CEFACT Forums and meetings that include gender issues in trade facilitation as an important topic for discussion. For example, the mini-conference held in the context of the twenty-eighth UN/CEFACT Forum in Bangkok in September 2016, introduced “Women in Trade Facilitation” as a new topic, presented participants from all over the world with an overview of key issues and opened the dialogue about steps that are needed to eliminate gender inequalities in trade facilitation.
- The inclusion of a specific clause, aiming to reduce gender inequalities, in the UN/CEFACT Trade and Transport Facilitation Monitoring Mechanism (TTFMM) Recommendation, stating that “UN/CEFACT is committed to ensuring that the gender dimension is reflected in norms, roles, procedures, and access to resources. Government and trade are encouraged to promote equal opportunities for women

and men within the scope of the activities of National Trade Facilitation bodies or similar institutions. UN/CEFACT specifically encourages the collection, analysis, and monitoring of gender disaggregated data in order to better understand and support women's engagement in international trade and transport facilitation. This Recommendation encourages governments, business communities, development partners, international organizations, and other policymakers to follow the UN/CEFACT commitment to ensure inclusiveness for women."³ Such formulation should also be included in future UN/CEFACT recommendations.

- In terms of internal policies, UN/CEFACT has made a commitment to increase awareness among its staff about gender concerns by requiring they participate in mandatory gender training (e.g. "I know gender" training organized by United Nations Women Training Centre) as well as encouraging them to take trade and gender-related courses (e.g. an online course on "Trade and Gender" organized by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Virtual Institute). UN/CEFACT is also committed to ensuring high involvement of women in its activities. Currently, approximately 43 per cent of UN/CEFACT global participants are women and in the UNECE office, serving as UN/CEFACT Secretariat, women represent around 60 per cent of current employees.

10. For future developments, UN/CEFACT identifies and recommends the following actions in the scope of its activities as a possible way of contributing to the SDG 5 on gender equality:

- Improving access for women to information about import and export procedures, procedures of border agencies, requirements for customs declarations, and related services, which would support their economic empowerment through enhanced trade openness and transparency;
- Building social and economic networks for women, thus enhancing opportunities for knowledge and experience-sharing and pooling of goods. This would help female entrepreneurs to access trade services at lower prices and to successfully participate in international trade;
- Eliminating disparity between men and women in transaction costs and timing associated with access to markets and services;
- Increasing overall transparency of trade rules and procedures, which will help to overcome procedural obstacles to trade. This will benefit women more strongly, due to women's more limited access to the "inside contacts and information";
- Improving cooperation with customs authorities, neighbouring and third countries, and providing a better understanding about rules and processes applied in international trade to specific products, which helps to reduce barriers for women in international trade activities.
- Increasing the measurement and assessment of progress with respect to women's engagement in trade facilitation in order to allow the tracking and monitoring of gender-related constraints and its impacts;

³ See also UNECE Recommendation n°42 on Trade and Transport Facilitation Monitoring Mechanism (TTFMM), available at http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/uncefact/plenary/2017/ECE_TRADE_C_CEFACT_2017_8E_Rec42_TTFMM_Final.pdf (accessed 17 February 2017).

- Supporting gender-informed standards setting for trade with a view to increase women's participation in, and contribution to policy and decision-making in trade facilitation;
- Designing a communication strategy for conscious gender-balanced perspectives in trade facilitation, in order to raise awareness about the need for change.

11. Close cooperation with other United Nations organizations (World Bank, United Nations Women, International Trade Centre, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Regional Commissions, United Nations Development Programme, etc.), governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations is a key element of this work—along with adequate financial support in order to ensure implementation of relevant activities and their effective impact.
