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POLICY BRIEF

FOSTERING GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN NATIONAL TRADE FACILITATION COMMITTEES

Recent UNCTAD research shows that national trade facilitation committees are far from being gender balanced bodies. Most of these committees consider specific actions for gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation neither a priority nor relevant at this stage. There is a lack of awareness on the importance of gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation at national level. International agencies that support national trade facilitation committees could play a role to address this gap. For that to happen, national trade facilitation committees should place the gender issue on their agendas and, if necessary, request support on this specific subject from international partners.

National trade facilitation committees: A platform to promote gender equality?

National Trade Facilitation Committees (NTFCs) are consultative multi-stakeholder platforms that aim at supporting the promotion and implementation of trade facilitation reforms. Although with different objectives, set-ups and memberships, NTFCs have been existing around the world since the 1950s and UNCTAD has been supporting countries in the endeavor of establishing and maintaining them for over 40 years.¹

Article 23.2 of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, which entered into force on 22 February 2017, stipulates the obligation for countries to set up or maintain a coordination mechanism that will support the implementation of the trade facilitation provisions included in the Agreement.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims, among other goals, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Since NTFCs are bodies working on the development of trade policies and trade facilitation standards, achieving a gender balanced membership is crucial. As explained in UNECE's Briefing note on the contribution of UN/CEFACT to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), "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 success in increasing exports and enable women to achieve higher income opportunities"².

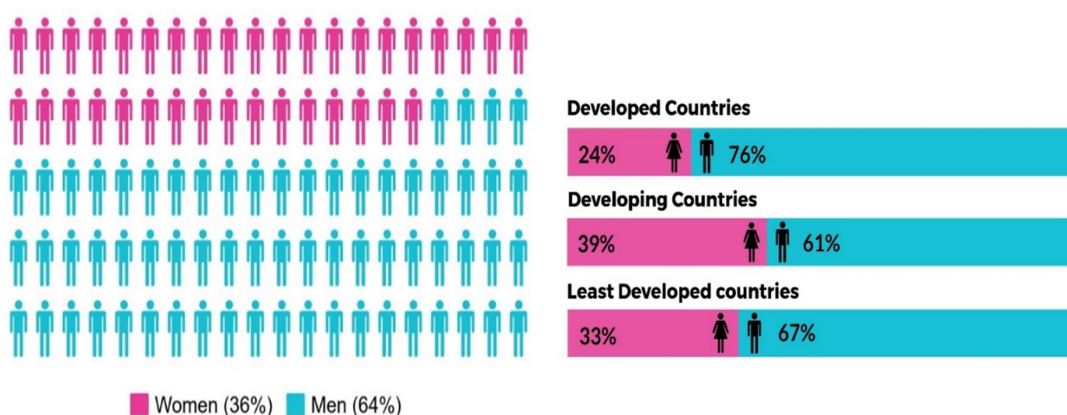


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¹ More information on National Trade Facilitation Committees and UNCTAD's work in this field can be found at <http://unctad.org/tf>.

² UNECE (2017), Briefing note on the contribution of UN/CEFACT to UN Sustainable Development Goal 5, Executive Committee, Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, Twenty-third session.

Figure 1
Average gender distribution in National Trade Facilitation Committees



Source: UNCTAD – Sample per level of development: developed countries (5), developing countries (28), least developed countries (6).

NTFCs and their members are key actors determining the shape, scope and direction of trade facilitation reforms and as such also have an impact on the structure of the local trading community. While trade policies, procedures and standards are the same for everybody, their impact is not gender neutral, as women and men will be impacted differently in every instance. Many informal traders in developing countries are female, and helping to formalize informal trade through enhanced transparency and easier procedures thus has a particularly bearing on women traders. Enhancing access to trade facilitation measures also helps women entrepreneurs better benefit from the economic opportunities arising under trade reforms.

In that sense, NTFCs could take the lead and become promoters of gender equality by ensuring increased female participation in the committees and by systematically applying a gender perspective in their set-up and work.

UNCTAD's research has shown that National Trade Facilitation Committees are far from considering gender mainstreaming a priority for them.

Addressing the lack of awareness on the importance of gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation

In 2017, a specific survey on the gender perspective in NTFCs was carried out by UNCTAD amongst the contacts listed in UNCTAD's Repository for National Trade Facilitation Committees.³ Between April and May 2017, a total of 39 countries (five developed, 28 developing and six

least developed countries) answered the questionnaire.

Results show that, at present, **National Trade Facilitation Committees are not gender balanced. On average, only 36 per cent of members of NTFCs are female.** This percentage goes down to 24 per cent in the case of the developed countries that participated in the survey (see Figure 1).

Not only are Committees not gender-balanced, but it also transpires from the survey that **most NTFCs (62 per cent) are usually chaired or co-chaired by men.** As shown in Figure 2, in Least Developed Countries only 17 per cent of National Trade Facilitation Committees are chaired or co-chaired by a woman.

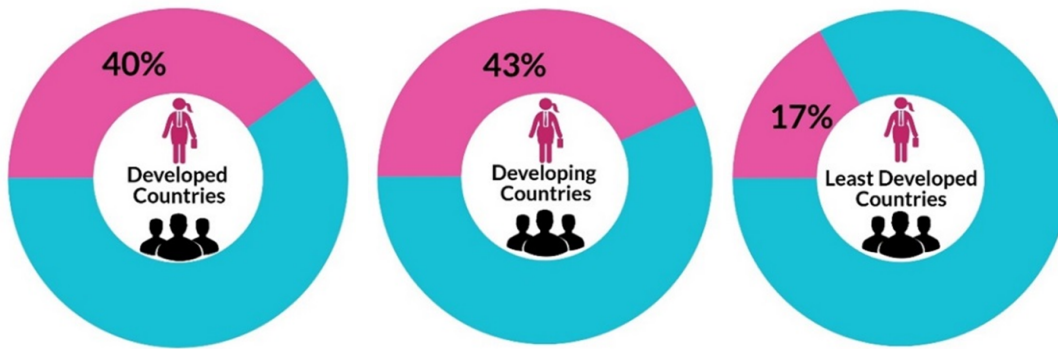
Besides having a gender imbalance in both the composition and leadership of Committees, NTFCs also lack concrete actions and decisions towards gender mainstreaming in trade facilitation. From the 39 countries that answered the survey, only one country affirmed that the Committee has ever taken a decision or action to mainstream gender in trade facilitation.

When asked why this is the case, **almost half of NTFCs affirm that this is due to a lack of awareness on gender mainstreaming** (44 per cent). Almost a third of Committees (31 per cent) considered that gender mainstreaming is not relevant at this stage. This means that NTFCs are currently not considering gender mainstreaming. Finally, 23 per

³ <http://unctad.org/tfc>.

Figure 2

Percentage of National Trade Facilitation Committees where their Chair, President or Vice-President is a woman, by level of development



Source: UNCTAD – Sample per level of development: developed countries (5), developing countries (28), least developed countries (6).

cent of bodies believed that gender mainstreaming is not a priority. While the latter is the main reason given by developed countries, developing and least developed countries were more concerned by to the lack of awareness on gender mainstreaming.

These results demonstrate that there is a long way to go to ensure gender mainstreaming in the work of National Trade Facilitation Committees as well as a gender balanced representation of its members, and that there is a need to raise awareness and understanding of the gender dimensions of trade facilitation. This need should be addressed urgently as the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum shows, for the first time since its inception, a reversal in progress towards gender equality.

Mainstreaming gender in the work of National Trade Facilitation Committees will not only contribute to the achievement of SDG 5, but also encourage more effective and innovative outcomes and processes. According to a study carried out by researchers at the University of Castilla la Mancha (Spain), a more balanced representation of women, particularly at the senior level, considerably outperform their counterparts with a lower representation of women. This conclusion was drawn after analyzing innovative activities performed in a sample of 4,277 companies. Teams with gender parity demonstrate greater potential for innovation.⁴

Policy recommendations for gender mainstreaming in national trade facilitation committees

UN Member States should encourage their National Trade Facilitation Committees to make concrete steps to address gender equality, regarding both the composition of the committee and the substance of its work. More concretely, now that many National Trade Facilitation Committees are being set-up to address the obligations of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, UN Member States should be vigilant and ensure that those committees:

1. Start out by mainstreaming trade facilitation in national trade policies, as this helps to formalize the informal traders, who are often women, and support women entrepreneurs in accessing foreign markets.
2. Track whether there is balanced participation between women and men in the NTFC. Establish a minimum level of representation of women in the NTFC. Where possible, use data disaggregated by gender.
3. Consider the gender-specific impacts in the assessment of any policy or standard proposed by the NTFC.
4. Promote that the proposed policy or standard responds to gender and/or sex-specific risks, vulnerabilities and needs, and assess if they contribute to the economic empowerment of women.⁵
5. Place gender high on the agendas of NTFCs and, if need be, request support, for instance from international agencies and donors, on this specific subject.

⁵ For more guidance on mainstreaming gender into trade policy, please visit: <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/DITC/Gender-and-Trade/Gender-mainstreaming-in-macro-economic-policies.aspx>.

⁴ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/03/140319085430.htm>.

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