



Briefing Paper

Gender Mainstreaming into E-commerce Policy: A More Holistic Framework

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Summary

This briefing paper summarises a study by CUTS International Geneva on "Addressing the Gender Dimension of E-commerce: Towards a Holistic Analytical and Policy Framework", available at <https://bit.ly/3FElyuX>. The research study explores the gender dimension of e-commerce, outlining the key gender gaps in the e-commerce ecosystem. Furthermore, it examines evolving e-commerce legislation and regulations through a gendered lens. It aims to generate a better understanding of the gender perspectives of E-commerce and provide a holistic framework for addressing present gender disparities through suitable policies and regulations.

Introduction

The digital economy, and e-commerce in particular, has grown exponentially during the last two decades. The years 2020 and 2021 are noted for the rapid expansion of e-commerce to new enterprises, customers, and products. E-commerce supported economic resilience during the COVID-19 crisis, with e-commerce platforms becoming the fastest expanding retail market as more people were encouraged to buy online. According to Coppola, citing Statista data from July 2021, "in 2020, global e-retail sales grew 27.6 per cent compared to the previous year, and retail e-commerce sales accounted for 18 per cent of global retail sales."¹

UNCTAD indicates that the digital economy and e-commerce enable developing countries, especially LDCs, to strengthen economic resilience and fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).² There is a "circular" relation between e-commerce and SDGs whereby boosting the e-commerce ecosystem has beneficial spillover effects that aid in achieving the SDGs.³ As a result, developing countries and LDCs aim to accelerate e-commerce adoption

However, "Digital economy and e-commerce are double-edged swords,"⁴ as during times of crisis, they support resilient supply chains, sustainable enterprises and trade, but may also exacerbate disparities if digital gaps and the needs of the vulnerable are not addressed. A digital divide and economic and social inequality threaten favourable spill-overs of e-commerce on small enterprises, economies and society. They may halt the growth of e-commerce and halt progress towards sustainable development.

Online business methods can help women

overcome the structural barriers they encounter in traditional trade and economic sectors.⁵ For example, online jobs allow women to work from home and yet care for their families. Also, internet financial services and e-wallets can help women become more financially independent. Despite the benefits, e-commerce also has potential to "leave more behind" and exacerbate existing gender structural gaps, including the digital divide. Systemic disparities do not diminish when transfigured by the internet.⁶ This calls for "gendering" e-commerce policy to ensure women's equal inclusion in the digital economy.

Gender Inequality Aspects in E-commerce: A Global View

It is vital to examine the various roles that women can play in e-commerce as consumers, employees, and entrepreneurs. UNCTAD identifies three key gender disparity domains: (i) capacities; (ii) access to resources and opportunities; and (iii) security.⁷

The capabilities domain: Education and digital skills

Women in developing and least-developed countries may be deprived of the opportunities presented by e-commerce due to a lack of access to education and digital skills. Many developing countries still have a substantial digital gender gap, as evidenced by data from ITU.⁸ This calls for more efforts to promote digital gender equality.

Educational hurdles also affect women and girls due to increased household responsibilities and gender prejudice against working women.⁹ Gender stereotypes influence women's desire and capacity to pursue advanced

¹ Coppola, D. (2021). E-commerce worldwide - Statistics & Facts, Statista.

² UNCTAD. (2021a). Covid-19 And E-Commerce A Global Review [Ebook].

³ Guglya, L., & Maciel, M. (2020). Addressing the Digital Divide in the Joint Statement Initiative on ECommerce: From enabling issues to data and source code provisions

⁴ Ismail, Y. (2020). Fast Forward e-Commerce: How Can Developing Countries Leap e-Commerce Barriers in the Post-Covid 19 Era? [Ebook]. Geneva: CUTS International, Geneva.

⁵ Guglya, L., & Maciel, M. (2020). Addressing the Digital Divide in the Joint Statement Initiative on ECommerce: From enabling issues to data and source code provisions.

⁶ Dy, A. M., Marlow, S., & Martin, L. (2017). A Web of opportunity or the same old story? Women digital entrepreneurs and intersectionality theory. *Human Relations*, 70(3), 286–311

⁷ UNCTAD. (2014). Virtual Institute Teaching Material on Trade and Gender Volume 1: Unfolding the links [Ebook]

⁸ ITU. (2021a). Bridging the gender divide

⁹ ITU. (2020). Women, ICT and emergency telecommunications: opportunities and constraints [Ebook]

education in Information and Telecommunications Technologies (ICT), or e-commerce-related industries. While girls outperform boys internationally in reading and writing, women continue to be underrepresented among top science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) performers.¹⁰ These factors contribute to economies where women lack not only the skills, confidence, and dedication required to prosper in the digital world, but also one in which few women are willing to play a leading role in this sector.¹¹ Women also continue to be under-represented among workers with disruptive technological abilities, which has a long-term impact on men and women's ability to engage equally in the future.¹²

The Access to Resources and Opportunities Domain

Lack of necessary digital infrastructure limits access to the internet and makes it expensive to use, restricting women's access to e-commerce. Broadband expansion in rural and urban regions comes at a high cost. Poor connectivity and unreliable power sources contribute to unstable internet connections, lowering customer and trader/entrepreneur trust in e-commerce. In a gendered economy, women suffer the impact of these restraints more than men. Especially when running SMEs or informal businesses, women entrepreneurs cannot afford the hefty prices of Internet and ICT hardware.

Globally, there is a significant gender difference in internet access. ITU estimated a 17% global gender disparity in internet access. In LDCs, the percentage difference expanded from 29.9% in 2013 to 42.8% in 2019. Moreover, just 15% of women in LDCs used the internet in 2019,

compared to 86% in developed countries.¹³ Some barriers to women using ICTs include employment segregation, gender wage discrepancies, lack of financial decision-making, childcare and unpaid domestic chores, and exclusion from the formal economy.¹⁴

Access to finance

Creating a robust financial infrastructure that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship is critical, especially for women. The Council on Foreign Relations estimates that female entrepreneurs face a USD1.5 trillion worldwide financing gap.¹⁵ UNCTAD reports that women are under-funded in technology, underlining the need to finance female digital entrepreneurs.¹⁶ Women's stereotypes also impede financial access, and access to resources is commonly described as a discriminatory limitation towards gender equality.¹⁷

The inability to link bank accounts to e-commerce platforms is another barrier for women. Diversifying digital wallets' use in informal e-commerce aids women in emerging and LDC countries. Women have less access to land and financing than men, which is a significant flaw in competitive online markets. Reforming laws, together with efficient implementation and enforcement, can help women gain fairer access, although many restrictions still hinder their access to e-commerce.¹⁸

Mastercard Index 2020 indicated that enhanced financial inclusion for women in the business allows access to various financial incentives, including obtaining and distributing subsidies and relief, applying for business loans, and online payments. The Index shows that most rural

¹⁰ UNGeneva. (2021). For women in e-commerce, 'entrepreneurship means freedom' | UN GENEVA.

¹¹ OECD. (2019). The Role of Education and Skills in Bridging the Digital Gender Divide Evidence From APEC Economies

¹² WEF. (2020b). The Future of Gender Parity

¹³ ITU. (2019a). Benchmark of Fifth Generation Collaborative Regulation (G5 Benchmark) [Ebook]. ITU (BDT).

¹⁴ ITU. (2020). Women, ICT and emergency telecommunications: opportunities and constraints [Ebook]

¹⁵ 5. Council on Foreign Relations. (2021). Women and E-Commerce: The \$300 Billion Opportunity. Retrieved 10 August

2021, from <https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-and-e-commerce-300-billion-opportunity>

¹⁶ UNCTAD. (2019). 6 things to know about women in e-commerce | UNCTAD.

¹⁷ Joeques, S., Frohmann, A., & Fontana, M. (2020). A Primer on Gender and Trade [Ebook]

¹⁸ UNECA. (2019). Women's entrepreneurship report - Education and finance for successful entrepreneurship in Africa [Ebook]. Addis Ababa: UNECA

women are "unbanked" due to a lack of gender-inclusive digital services supporting rural supply chains and food security systems. UNCTAD states that while some unbanked people and companies are unwilling to create accounts, the majority are unbanked owing to constraints such as cost, lack of documentation, lack of confidence, and travel distance.¹⁹ Women in e-commerce are disproportionately affected by these obstacles.

Time use

Time use refers to unpaid labour, family and domestic services, etc. Unpaid employment by women is a significant contributor to the gender gap since it takes up a lot of women's time and disadvantages those willing to work. E-commerce platforms enable businesses to function 24/7 without being physically present, allowing women to work from home.

Time usage surveys (TUS) are the most popular source of information regarding unpaid work. Obtaining time usage data in standalone, nationally representative surveys is difficult and costly. As a result, statistics on SDG 5.4 on unpaid care work are currently scarce.²⁰

Time usage data shows how gender norms and roles affect how men and women spend time. The distribution of paid and unpaid labour hours is asymmetric. Women do more unpaid work and less paid jobs than men.²¹ When digital platforms are integrated to ensure smooth manufacturing and supply chains, women may sell items while caring for the household. But it is equally important to evaluate the health effects on women who work and care for their families. Balancing jobs as a entrepreneur and a mother/wife, especially in developing countries and LDCs, can be difficult due to the low-profit margins of most e-commerce businesses.

Time use also applies to women customers who cannot leave their houses to shop or use services.

E-commerce allows consumers to easily access goods and services from the convenience of their homes. It also guarantees women's safety by removing the need to travel long distances at night to obtain services and goods.

Decision-making

Equal involvement in the economy requires women to take part in decisions in politics, government, business, and households. To adequately address the issues, women must be empowered and participate in e-commerce decision-making processes. Compared to women in developed countries, women in developing and LDC countries are frequently underrepresented.

Women, particularly those living in rural regions, tend to be excluded from local decision-making, especially when patriarchal traditions compel all-male land-use meetings. The fact that choices are made on behalf of women who want to utilise e-commerce platforms may prevent them from doing so. Recent research shows that despite rising female involvement in public life, the road to full equality at decision-making tables remains long.²²

The Security Domain: Vulnerability to online frauds and cybers-crimes

Cybercrime poses a hazard to women in particular. Women and girls who use e-commerce platforms are more vulnerable to cybercrime. Organisations and authorities fighting cybercrime must address gendered forms of cybercrime, most notably the online luring or "recruitment" of women and girls into dangerous situations like trafficking.²³ There should be self-regulatory standards developed to prevent harmful gender discrimination and the dissemination of negative images of women, e.g. linking sex with violence.

Women and girls are more vulnerable to cyber-

¹⁹ UNCTAD. (2021b). Financial Inclusion For Development: Better Access To Financial Services For Women, The Poor, And Migrant Work [Ebook]. Geneva: UNCTAD

²⁰ Rubiano-Matulevich, E., & Kashiwase, H. (2018). Why time use data matters for gender equality— and why it's hard to find

²¹ Ibid.

²² UN Women. (2021). Media Advisory: UN's Commission on the Status of Women highlights women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, 15-26 March

²³ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (2017). Cyber violence against women and girls [Ebook] (p. 2)

bullying and online harassment than men.²⁴ Women in e-commerce confront substantial obstacles such as security, privacy, digital threats, social networking worms, phishing bait, data breaches, impersonation, violence against women, and censorship. From \$3 trillion in 2015, Cybercrime Magazine predicted that the annual economic effect of cybercrime would rise to \$6 trillion by 2021. According to the Cybersecurity Guide (2021), equitable representation of women in the field might drastically help reduce the estimated shortfall of 3 million cybersecurity experts.²⁵ Women in developing countries and LDCs are wary of using e-commerce platforms owing to security concerns, and the absence of dependable internet access and digital infrastructure exacerbates cybersecurity threats.

As consumers, women are also vulnerable to phishing, online fraud and cyber-violence, demanding the strengthening of women's education on the dangers of digital platforms and how to avoid them.

E-commerce for Women's Economic Empowerment

As governments and other relevant actors ramp up efforts to foster an e-commerce-friendly ecosystem, they must ensure that the gender-specific problems and structural inequities identified are addressed across all relevant legislation. The study examined recent e-commerce governance assessment frameworks to pinpoint the essential issues to focus on in integrating gender into e-commerce policy-making.

Enabling E-commerce: A myriad of intersecting policies and regulations

Based on the ITC's four e-commerce transaction factors and a recent World Bank report, e-commerce governance resides at the convergence of four main policy areas: (i) ICT and connectivity, to ensure necessary digital infrastructure and connectivity services are accessible and affordable; (ii) Financial and e-payment services, to ensure online payments are possible; (iii) Trade and logistics facilitation, to allow faster transactions and successful deliveries; and (iv) Legislations and mechanisms that enhance the trust of businesses and consumers in using online mediums, such as consumer protection, online transactions dispute settlements, personal data protection and cybersecurity.²⁶

When it comes to ICT legislation, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has been leading the way. In 2020, the ITU announced its "Generation 5 (G5) Benchmark", recognising that "ICTs have progressed well beyond the domain of mere 'communications'". The ITU's G5 adopts a "collaborative regulation" approach.²⁷ It aims to: (i) Pillar 1 - expand collaboration between the ICT regulator and other regulators; (ii) Pillar 2 - promote participative policies; (iii) Pillar 3 - examine policies and tools needed to support countries' digital transformation and progress towards relevant SDGs; and (iv) Pillar 4 - instill these in the context of a country's Digital Economy Policy Agenda. Based on the score, the countries are classified as Limited, Transitioning, or Advanced in "Collaborative Regulation in ICT". The Benchmark cites policy instruments including cybercrime, consumer protection, data protection, and e-commerce transaction frameworks as critical for regulatory coordination in ICT. The gender-sensitive indicator "Broadband

²⁴ OECD. (2018). Bridging The Digital Gender Divide. Include, Upskill, Innovate [Ebook]. OECD

²⁵ Cybersecurity Guide. (2021). Women in Cybersecurity

²⁶ World Bank. (2020). Albania E-Commerce Diagnostic: Leveraging The Digital Trade Opportunity, Washington: World Bank Group.

²⁷ ITU. (2019a). Benchmark of Fifth Generation Collaborative Regulation (G5 Benchmark) [Ebook]. ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT).

plan/initiative involves encouraging the supply of broadband services to women and girls" under pillar 3 has also been improved.²⁸

The structure of the ongoing Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-commerce among many WTO members is influenced by more extensive e-commerce provisions and chapters in Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs). It includes e-payments, open internet, open government data, online platforms, and competition. The outcome of the JSI may set new standards which could significantly impact global e-commerce governance.

The UNCTAD eTrade Readiness Assessments and the eTrade for All initiative also provide useful insights. They provide an overview of the e-commerce ecosystem in select developing countries, based on seven policy pillars. These include the development of an e-commerce development strategy, as well as: ICT infrastructure, payment solutions, trade facilitation and logistics, legal and regulatory frameworks, skills development, and access to finance.

These assessments have addressed gender-related capacity building in a particular manner, as demonstrated in the framework adopted under skills development pillar. UNCTAD also noted rising gender discrepancies in LDCs in internet

access, use, and financial opportunity.²⁹ In addition, an e-Trade for Women initiative was established in 2019, which empowers women entrepreneurs in developing countries to influence e-commerce policies.

E-commerce Policy Enablers: A Framework for Integrating Gender Considerations

Analysis of the above several e-commerce frameworks suggests that room remains for more comprehensive gender mainstreaming into such frameworks. Indeed, the complexity of e-commerce stems from how many different policy areas it cuts across, and the fruits of a carefully designed gender-responsive policy in one area can be nullified by another gender blind or gender-neutral policy in another area.³⁰

Gender integration in e-commerce policies requires a holistic approach to ensure long-term effectiveness. In this regard, the authors of the study proposed an updated framework for gender mainstreaming into e-commerce governance, with policy recommendations and instruments to address gender inequalities in policy areas critical to an effective e-commerce ecosystem. A summary table of the proposed framework is provided in Table 1 below.

²⁸ ITU. (2021b). The Benchmark Of Fifth Generation Collaborative Regulation, Expert Report to the Review Board, 21 June 2021

²⁹ UNCTAD. (2020). Fast-tracking implementation of eTrade Readiness Assessments [Ebook]. Geneva: United Nations

³⁰ Ismail, Y., Stuurman, F., Sajous, L., & Grollier, J. (2020). Mainstreaming Gender in Key ECommerce Policy Areas: Possible Lessons for AfCFTA [Ebook] (p. 11). Geneva: CUTS International, Geneva

Table 1: Proposed Updated Framework for Gender Mainstreaming

Key E-commerce Enabling Policies	Relevant Gendered Gaps and Barriers			
	Capabilities and Skills	Resources and Opportunities	Security, Privacy and Trust	Regulatory and Policy Recommendations
1) ICT and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IT and ICT literacy gaps. Cultural and social stereotypes about women's limited capabilities to learn ICT and acquire ICT skills. Lack of skills and understanding of the uses of emerging ICT technologies. Lack of needed language skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender connectivity gap (access and affordability of internet connection – Mobile and fixed). The gender pay gap in various sectors and subsequent gaps in access and affordability of ICT hardware and digital services. Limited financial resources are available for women entrepreneurs to adopt e-commerce ICT applications in their businesses and receive the necessary training on their use. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting investments in connectivity Infrastructures in rural areas and remote areas with a significant percentage of women consumers and/or producers. Foster competition in ICT hardware and services sectors to reduce costs. Promote « Corporate Digital Responsibility - CDR» where giant tech companies develop programmes to promote women and women-led businesses access to ICT hardware and the Internet at affordable prices. Incorporate digital skills in education systems. Raise awareness on the potentials of e-commerce for girls and women and publicise digital champions among women. Provide technical and vocational training on e-commerce ICT applications and uses targeting sectors with high potential for women-led businesses. Supporting vocational training for formal and informal women-led e-commerce businesses and tech start-ups.
2) Trade Facilitation and Market Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women traders' limited awareness of cross-border trade regulations and market standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor postal infrastructure in rural and remote areas. The informality of women-led businesses. Limited access to information on market opportunities. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopting Government E-procurement platforms and measures to support women entrepreneurs as e-commerce suppliers of goods and services. Supporting Women's access to government e-services. Facilitating women's access to customs regulations and export markets standards. Prioritising women's businesses as suppliers of e-commerce goods and services.
3) Electronic Payments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of awareness on characteristics and guarantees of secure online payments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women financial inclusion and control challenges. Women's lack of collateral and prevalence of subsistence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited trust in e-payments and cash prevalence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reforming discriminatory regulations in terms of salary/pays, pension, taxes and opening bank accounts. Financing, microcredit and crowdsourcing for women's businesses.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vulnerability to frauds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The informality of women businesses and lack of access to governments, banks and micro-credit suppliers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vulnerability to online frauds due to lack of digital skills and awareness of precautions against online threats. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting payment security knowledge and awareness among women. Applying tax incentives for women-led e-commerce small businesses and start-ups and promote their formalisation.
4) Business and Consumers Trust				
A - Consumer Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of technical knowledge and skills to understand online threats to consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender gaps in general literacy Gender gaps in online literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women consumers' limited awareness of online consumer rights, and aftersales policies and recourse mechanisms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including gender-specific provisions in online consumer protection laws, as appropriate Providing faster redressal mechanisms for women consumers Improving awareness of online consumer rights among women through targeted campaigns
B - Data and Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of awareness of existing personal data protection laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited adoption of comprehensive and effective Personal Data Protection laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patriarchal attitudes regarding women's privacy and the need to be protected. Women's particular vulnerability to abuse and harassment. Absence of Personal Data Protection or the lacking of provisions addressing gender-specific privacy-related crimes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopting Personal Data Protection laws. Including gender-specific provisions in Personal Data Protection Laws imposing strengthened penalties for any illegal transfer and/or use of women online personal data for abuse and/or harassment. Raising awareness on existing Personal Data Protection rules and regulations.
C - Cybersecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of information, knowledge and understanding of cybersecurity threats and how to mitigate them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited financial resources and affordability of cybersecurity technologies and applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence of Personal Data Protection or the lacking of provisions addressing gender-specific cybercrimes in a specific society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopting cybersecurity laws. Including gender-specific provisions in cybersecurity laws imposing strengthened penalties for cybercrimes to which women are particularly vulnerable depending on the country and society. Raising awareness on existing cybersecurity rules and how to evoke them. Providing women-led businesses with affordable cybersecurity applications.

Source : Ismail and Hirani (2021)

Conclusion

A gender digital divide exists in the e-commerce industry, with women facing lower inclusion and more economic and social obstacles. So long as women lack equitable and affordable access to technology and the internet, as well as the skills necessary to engage online, they will be unable to fully participate in today's increasingly digital society. E-commerce policies should be seen as a tool for women's empowerment in pursuing development goals, and it is crucial that e-commerce legislation takes into account the specific challenges and characteristics of women.

In a recent study by Ismail and Hirani (2021), several e-commerce policy frameworks were analysed with a gender lens, including the ITU G5 Benchmark, UNCTAD's eTrade Readiness Assessments, the ongoing JSI negotiations at the WTO, and existing provisions in RTAs. While these frameworks differ in their focus, underlying aims, and proposed measures, combining their relevant features can provide a more comprehensive action menu for empowering women in e-

commerce.

Among the key elements contributing to gender inequality in e-commerce that can be identified were: (i) weaknesses in the capabilities domain, i.e., education and digital skills; (ii) access to resources and opportunities, i.e., lack of connectivity and digital access, access to finance, time use, decision making and; (iii) the security domain, i.e., vulnerability to online frauds and cyber-violence.

The study proposed a more holistic framework for incorporating gender issues across all e-commerce policy domains. The approach tackles three gendered gaps under each of the four main e-commerce enablers: capabilities and skills, resources and opportunities, and security, privacy, and trust. The proposed framework also presents a detailed gap analysis, as well as actionable recommendations. This methodology may be used as a new reference by policy makers, especially in developing countries and LDCs, in their efforts to promote greater gender equality in the digital sphere.



CUTS International, Geneva

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