

UNCTAD contribution to the SG report on “Women in development”, 2022

1. Strengthening and implementing gender-responsive poverty eradication strategies, including social protection systems, to help ensure an adequate standard of living for women and girls, especially in response to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (paragraph 10 of the Resolution)

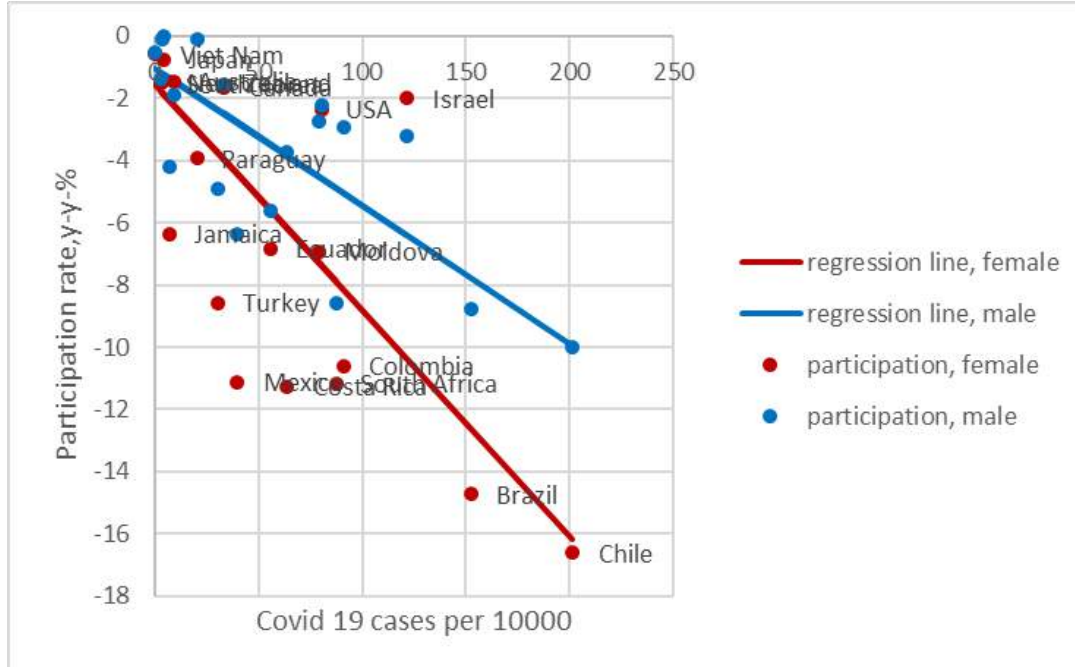
Women and labour force participation: What we can learn from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic’s impacts on employment reflect the gender segregation of societies – the fact that women and men tend to work in different sectors and hold different jobs.

According to UNCTAD analysis¹, more women than men left the labour market entirely in 2020 – a very worrying trend that threatens to rollback progress on women’s empowerment. Discouraged by the pandemic and busy with increased household responsibilities, many women who lost their jobs stopped looking for work. Figure 1. shows the strong correlation that exists between COVID-19 prevalence and a decline in women’s labour force participation.

In the United States, in 2020 women’s labour force participation dropped by 3.4 per cent compared with 2.8 per cent for men. In Chile, in August 2020, women’s decline in labour force participation was 16.6 per cent year-on-year compared with 10 per cent for men. In Italy, women’s labour force participation, already notably lower than that of men before the crises, decreased by 3.7 per cent as compared to 1.2 per cent for men during December 2019 to December 2020.

Figure 1. Female and male participation rates versus COVID-19 prevalence, August 2020



Year-on-year change of labour force participation rate and COVID-19 cases per 10 000 people

Source: The University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government (2020), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), and ILO (2021)

¹ UNCTAD, 2021, [Gender and unemployment: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

2. Increasing investments in and implementation of gender-responsive policies and programmes for full and productive employment and decent work for all women, including their participation in and access to labour markets, and addressing women's disproportionate job losses during the COVID-19 crisis (paragraphs 31 and 32)

The number of initiatives that aim to mainstream gender into trade have increased over time. They are found within new trade agreements, in the work of international organizations, and at the national level. Among them, there are ex-ante gender impact assessments of trade reforms, including trade agreements. They serve to gather evidence about how trade reforms affect women and men, and overall gender equality. The central question of a gender impact assessment is whether the law, policy or measure being assessed reduces, maintains, or increases inequalities between women and men. As early as 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action called for gender impact assessments².

UNCTAD has developed the [Trade and Gender Toolbox](#), which offers a systematic framework to evaluate the impact of trade reforms on women and gender equalities, prior to the implementation of these reforms. The Toolbox was first applied to assess how the economic partnership agreement (EPA) between the EU and the East African Community (EAC) would affect Kenyan women. The toolbox methodology was applied by the EU in the Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) of the modernization of the Trade Part of the EU–Chile Association Agreement, and by Canada in its Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), an expanded economic impact assessment of all policies, including free trade agreements. Other interested policymakers could also make use of the methodology to carry out ex-ante gender impact assessment of proposed trade agreements and get assistance from UNCTAD if needed.³

3. Promoting the transition of women from informal employment to formal employment, including access to decent work, improved wages, social protection and quality childcare (paragraph 11)

Informal cross-border trade is a major characteristic of the African economic and social landscape, representing up to 40 per cent of regional trade. Women make up the largest share of informal traders, representing 70 to 80 per cent in some countries. These women trade a wide range of agricultural products (e.g., fruits, vegetables, fish, cereals) and manufactured products (e.g., new and second-hand

² Paragraph 165 advises governments to seek to ensure that national policies related to trade agreements “do not have an adverse impact on women’s new and traditional economic activities”, and “to use gender-impact analyses in the development of macro and micro-economic and social policies to monitor such impact and restructure policies in cases where harmful impact occurs.”

³ The Trade and Gender Toolbox uses a stepwise approach to evaluate the impact of trade reforms on women’s wellbeing and gender inequalities. It is composed of four components: i) Gendered economic outcomes; ii) Estimation results; iii) Monitoring indicators; iv) Trade and Gender Index. Component 1 describes the prevailing situation regarding gender inequalities and the economic context in the country at stake. Component 2 estimates the economic impact of a specific trade reform at the sectoral level (e.g., labour demand by sector), based on a CGE model. It then matches these estimates with women’s share of employment in each sector (identified in the first component) to identify the sectors in which gender employment inequalities are expected to improve or worsen. Component 3 consists of a checklist to guide the design and implementation of accompanying measures to either enhance the positive effects of trade reforms on gender equality or to reduce the risk of exacerbating gender inequalities. The Toolbox also proposes a Trade and Gender Index to measure the co-evolution of trade openness and gender inequalities in employment at the sectoral level.

clothes and shoes, kitchen tools, blankets, bed sheets). In that sense, such trade also contributes to food security.

COVID-19 has brought new challenges to micro-entrepreneurs and informal and small-scale cross-border traders. During the first wave of the pandemic, lockdowns drew cross-border activities to a halt, hitting small-scale traders hard. With hardly any business, they had no other choice but to use their savings to meet their family's needs. When borders reopened, many traders found themselves unable to restart their business at a level comparable to before the lockdown. New requirements such as holding health certificates to cross borders, and related costs, even made them reconsider their business strategies. Moreover, during times of crisis, vulnerable groups are increasingly drawn into the shadow economy, therefore trading informally has expanded during the pandemic.

However, trading is a necessity for these micro entrepreneurs, especially for women. It allows them to ensure the wellbeing of their families and to provide for children's needs, including education, the best way to escape the poverty trap.

UNCTAD has been supporting micro-entrepreneurs and small-scale and informal cross-border traders, especially women traders, since 2016, with trainings aimed at improving awareness about trade rules and customs procedures and increasing entrepreneurship skills. Since the starting of the health crisis in Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia, the trainings have included a new component devoted to resilience and business recovery in the wake of the pandemic.

Beyond trainings at the border, activities have included policy dialogue with policymakers on several issues. To create attractive conditions so that small but potentially vibrant entrepreneurs would want to formalize their business, for example by relaxing required registration or making registration possible at the border. To facilitate cross-border trade through Simplified Trade Regimes, but also to make sure that traders are familiar with them. The requirements for small-scale traders to trade under this modality could benefit of further simplification, for example by not having to prove the origin of merchandise. Entrepreneurs operating informally have been excluded from most benefits and programmes put in place during the emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Showing the benefits of formalization is a valuable way for including informal entrepreneurs in the response.

4. Promoting the transition of women from informal employment to formal employment, including access to decent work, improved wages, social protection and quality childcare (paragraph 11)

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5. Supporting women's entrepreneurship, expanding existing women-owned and -led micro, small and medium enterprises and facilitating opportunities for new women entrepreneurs (paragraph 37)

As drivers of economic growth, investment and enterprise development have enormous potential to lead to progress on SDG 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. An inter-agency collaboration between United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and UNCTAD has aimed at developing impact female entrepreneurs across various levels in value chains engaged in supply and distribution of products and services, with a view to facilitate sustainable post COVID-19 resurgence in the MSME sector of India and implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. A total of eight workshops with 75 women entrepreneurs have been conducted in 2021, followed by an on-going peer-learning approach to habit-formation, called Empretec Gym.

Empretec Women in Business Awards, established in 2008, make a significant impact on the lives of past winners who became role models and empower other women to take up the entrepreneurship challenge. In 2020, the prize went to a Jordanian tech entrepreneur, whose tech academy prepares children from 6 to 16 years to be innovators and engineers, and then to commercialize their ideas, with a special focus on Artificial Intelligence, the internet of things, and robotics. With the Awards, UNCTAD actively contributes to raising awareness on social and environmental pillars of the 2030 Agenda and promoting inclusive and sustainable businesses that can support Member States in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The introduction of new online digital government platforms providing essential services to SMEs benefits female entrepreneurs and addresses some of the fundamental barriers to gender equality. For instance, the Global Initiative towards Post-COVID-19 Resurgence of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Sector (MSME Surge Project) supported the creation of the Cuenta MYPE online single window which provided a platform to access a \$600 million Covid rescue package in El Salvador. A majority 56 per cent of entrepreneurs using the platform were female.

With a view to empower women entrepreneurs in the digital economy, UNCTAD has launched the eTrade for Women initiative in September 2019. The initiative develops its activities along its four strategic action lines: advocacy, capacity-building, community-building and policy dialogue. UNCTAD selects and nurtures a group of the eTrade for Women Advocates (currently 6) from all developing regions.⁴ They serve as role models for the next generation of women entrepreneurs and strive to bring women's voices to the forefront to influence policymaking at the national and global levels. Prepared and delivered jointly with the Advocates, in 2021, 3 online Masterclasses were delivered for 116 women entrepreneurs from 19 countries in the Balkans, Eastern Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The Masterclasses pave the way for the creation of eTrade for Women Communities. After launching the first Community in 2020 in West Africa, the initiative expanded to 3 additional regions in 2021: Southeast Asia, Eastern Africa and the Balkans, to reach more than 100 members in 27 countries, 13 of which are LDCs. Taking advantage of the convening power of UNCTAD and the eTrade for all partners, eTrade for Women has also facilitated a series of consultations between policymakers and women digital entrepreneurs at the local, regional and global levels.

⁴ Advocates [individual profiles and video interviews](#)