

SheTrades: An E-Commerce Initiative to Tackle Trade

Barriers for Women in Least Developed Countries

Sydney Phillips

King's University College

May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## **Gender-Segregated Trade**

After visiting Paris, Brussels, and Geneva to meet with officials at various international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Trade Centre (ITC), I spoke with them about the barriers to trade that women in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) face. I challenged the narrative in international political economic discourse, which promotes global trading systems that perpetuate gender segregated and male-dominated trade. I found statistics that challenge this discourse and show that women have the capacity to positively impact international trade. I learned that in any given country, small businesses make up ninety percent of enterprises and provide the majority of new jobs for people.<sup>1</sup> Although small women-owned businesses make up a large proportion of these statistics, they are often left out of the dominant narrative. Recent statistics show that supporting more small women-owned businesses has the potential to add twenty-eight trillion dollars into the global economy by the year 2025.<sup>2</sup> Recent statistics also show that women tend to outperform male-owned business firms once women are given the opportunity to move up global value chains.<sup>3</sup>

## **Challenges for Women in Trade in LDCs**

Although women can contribute a great deal to global trading systems, women face numerous barriers to trade, especially in LDCs. Given that different economies have women that participate in different sectors, the agricultural sector dominates economies in LDCs. Women in the agricultural sector face more burdens than men with trade regulations, which explains why women-owned farms export less than men. For example, small women-owned businesses have to go through many more steps than men when exporting, and may encounter challenges such as

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Programme Officer, Women and Trade Programme at the ITC in discussion on SheTrades, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

harassment and neglect at borders across sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Also, many women in LDCs lack the basic rights to owning land or a business, which greatly hinders their ability to engage in international trading systems.

Further, as a result of the digital divide in several LDCs that many women face, women lack communication technologies, which can negatively impact their ability to engage in international trade. Consequently, this harms women's capacity to exchange knowledge and network with other women-owned businesses and members of the international trading system.

International development agencies are attempting to generate better data on trade impacts on women and recognize the challenges listed above for women in trade. International development agencies recognize that trade agreements are not enough to solve trade challenges that women face, however, these agencies are requesting more transparency in trade regulations, which could reduce space for discrimination against women.

### **Countering Gender-Segregated Trade with SheTrades**

Perhaps the most prominent development focus that is emerging by international development agencies for women in LDCs is e-commerce initiatives. E-commerce involves commercial transactions conducted electronically on the internet. E-commerce is transforming international trading systems and is giving vulnerable groups such as women the opportunity to take part in the economy. However, not all LDCs have access to the technology required for e-commerce transactions due to the digital divide.

International development agencies like the ITC are attempting to address this digital divide in LDCs that women in trade face. The ITC is a joint organization of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, and was created to foster inclusive trade and sustainable

---

<sup>4</sup> Counsellor, Canada's Permanent Mission to the WTO in discussion on trade, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

development for people in LDCs. The ITC seeks to directly address the gender gap that exists in international trade, and developed the SheTrades initiative to do so.

SheTrades was created in 2015 to better understand the challenges that women face in trade and to connect more women to international markets through mobile and web applications. The SheTrades initiative has seven main focuses, including: data collection on sexist-segregated data, ensuring fair policies for women in trade, creating government contracts such as government procurement to support women in trade, conducting business deals for the private sector, providing market access including capacity building initiatives, providing financial services for women, and ensuring ownership rights for women in trade.<sup>5</sup> The SheTrades mobile application was established to track the commitments of trading partners, to conduct global matchmaking between women-owned businesses, to provide online training for women, and to target vulnerable groups for more inclusive economic growth.<sup>6</sup>

The SheTrades initiative attempts to address the global digital divide that impacts women in LDCs by building partnerships with companies such as Mozilla and Google through providing training on e-commerce, having offline services for women that lack access to the internet, giving free internet browsing for users of the SheTrades app, and providing technical expertise to women on mobile payments and training.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Future of SheTrades**

Since its launch in 2015, SheTrades has been measured successful by the ITC thus far. Digital e-commerce solutions can overcome discrimination with face-to-face interactions that women endure during business encounters. Additionally, SheTrades has provided women with

---

<sup>5</sup> Vanessa Erogbogbo, “SheTrades, because she can,” *International Trade Forum*, 1 (2016): 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Associate Programme Officer, Women and Trade Programme at the ITC in discussion on SheTrades, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

more networking opportunities with other women-owned businesses, and has ensured that women are working in more senior-level positions in their businesses.

Overall, the SheTrades initiative is successfully on the way to its goal of one million users of the app by 2020, and the pervasiveness of introducing women-owned businesses from LDCs into the international trading system is hopeful.

#### TAKE AWAY 1

The global trading system promotes gender segregated trade, which creates barriers to international trade for women in LDCs.

#### TAKE AWAY 2

Providing support to women-owned enterprises could add 28 trillion dollars into the global economy by 2025.

#### TAKE AWAY 3

Women have trouble accessing the international trading system as a result of the digital divide that is prevalent in LDCs, and the ITC is attempting to challenge the digital divide with e-commerce initiatives.

#### TAKE AWAY 4

Since its establishment in 2015, SheTrades has been successful in connecting women to international trade markets through mobile and web applications, and has helped to decreased discrimination against women in the international trading sector.

## Bibliography

Erogbogbo, Vanessa. "SheTrades, because she can." *International Trade Forum* 1 (2016): 24-25.