

# WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

## An Action Plan to 'Build Back Better'



IN COLLABORATION WITH:



SheTrades



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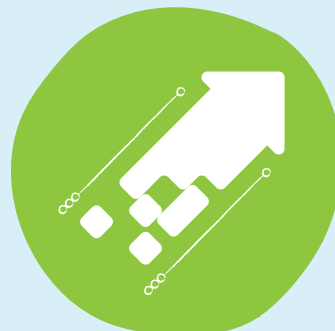
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# WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

An Action Plan to 'Build Back Better'

***build  
back  
better!***



## ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF

COVID-19 is reshaping global value chains and policy landscapes. In this brief, leaders from government, business and women's economic empowerment networks identify key trends and potential scenarios for women in trade.

The brief presents nine actions that governments, corporations and the global community can take to ensure that 'building back better' unlocks women's entrepreneurship and results in more equal and sustainable societies. These actions include strategies to boost women's participation in corporate and government procurement markets, devise financing and business support options that match the needs of small women-led firms, and provide targeted training to promote resilience and competitiveness.

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# Foreword

From the devastating health emergency to the social, economic and political shocks, the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off guard. We convey our condolences to those who have been affected by this crisis and express our gratitude to the frontline workers who are toiling tirelessly to keep the global community safe.

Beyond the immediate need to find medical solutions to fight the pandemic, we must also collectively take steps to ensure a full and sustainable economic recovery. As noted in the G20 Leaders' Statement earlier this year, we must protect workers and businesses, especially in the most affected sectors, to make this a reality. Engaging in international trade and promoting global cooperation can contribute greatly to maintaining delivery of key goods and services and continuity of global supply chains.

Women play an important role in the economy and international trade. For example, women often work or own businesses to support their families, take on a larger share of care and domestic responsibilities, and are more likely to make household income decisions that benefit their families and their communities. When it comes to trade, we see that women entrepreneurs tend to grow their businesses faster and employ more people – both men and women – which can contribute to economic growth, innovation, productivity, poverty reduction and development.

However, women own just one in five exporting companies. Due to their size and sectoral concentration, women-led businesses are more affected by shocks such as COVID-19.

The current situation requires us to ensure that the crisis does not exacerbate existing gender inequalities that affect women's access to resources and equitable economic opportunities. It presents us with the impetus to involve women as part of the solution for economic resilience beyond the pandemic, and simply because it is 'smart economics'.

Now, more than ever, an inclusive agenda that takes into account gender-specific roles and needs is essential.

The International Chamber of Commerce, the International Trade Centre, UPS and Women 20 are pleased to share with you a policy brief that examines potential trajectories for global value chains and policy ecosystems as a result of the pandemic. This brief also assesses the role of women as part of the recovery process and presents actionable recommendations for different stakeholder groups.

This discussion is particularly timely as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and usher in the 'Decade for Action' towards the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

We hope the recommendations in this brief will spark meaningful contributions by the private sector, policymakers and the international community to support women's entrepreneurship in the post-COVID-19 era.

**John W.H. Denton AO**

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International Chamber  
of Commerce

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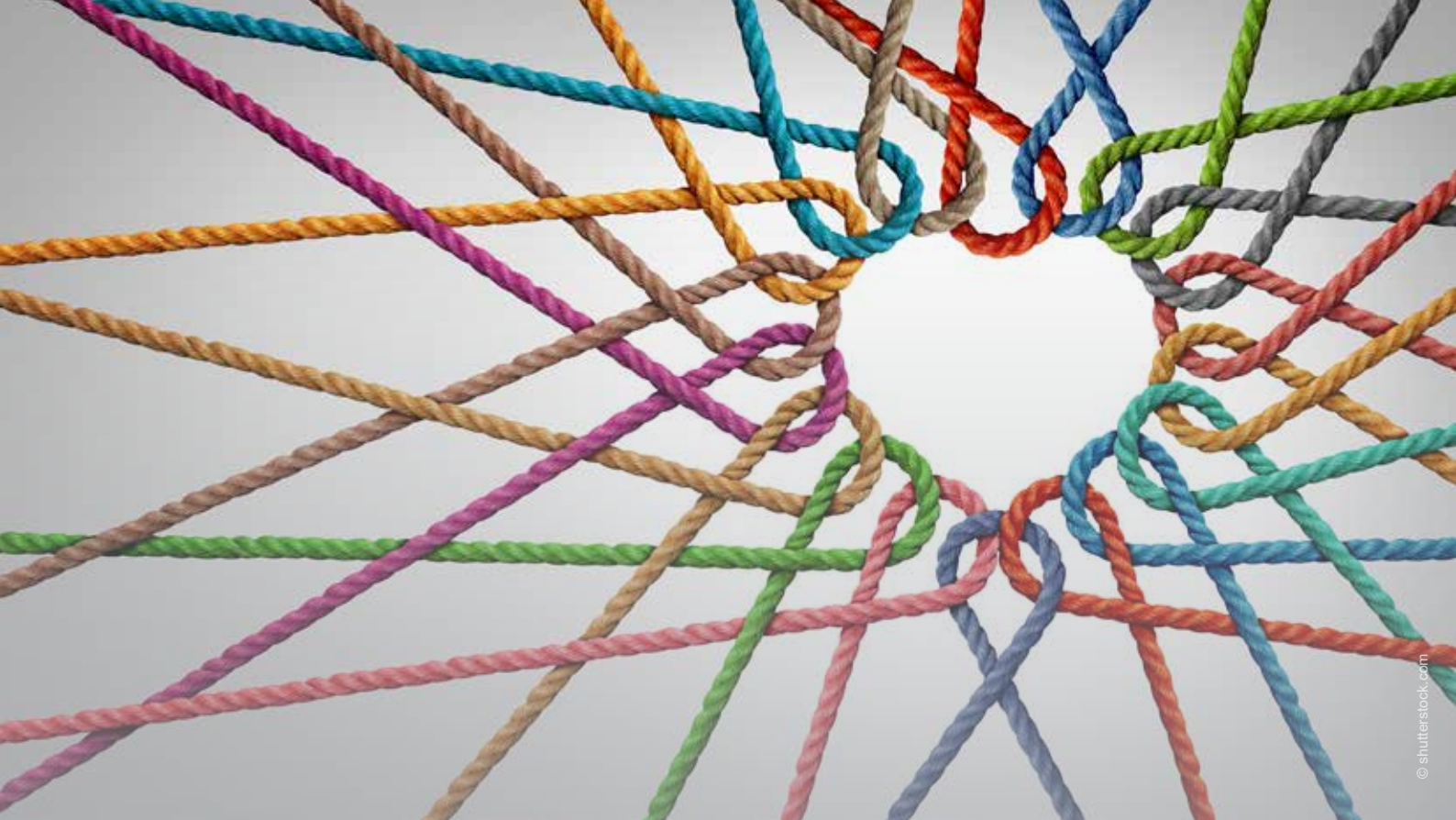
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NEARSHORING AND NEW FORMS  
OF COMPETITION IN MEXICO

# Acronyms

Unless otherwise specified, all references to dollars (\$) are to United States dollars, and all references to tons are to metric tons.

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
ITC	International Trade Centre
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WTO	World Trade Organization



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international community finds itself in a rapidly changing environment, faced with considerable uncertainty, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the common goal of ‘building back better’ in mind, public and private stakeholders must work together not only to assess and mitigate the effects of the crisis on the socioeconomic landscape, but also to leverage the opportunity to create a more resilient and inclusive future.

Women make important contributions to growth and development worldwide through their participation in the economy and trade, despite facing many complex gender-specific challenges. Taking steps to ensure that everyone has access to equal economic opportunities will enable women to play a key role in sustainable economic recovery.

## Six trends driving change for women's entrepreneurship

Based on a survey and inputs from trade experts and practitioners, policymakers and corporates, this policy brief analyses current trends to identify six potential post-COVID-19 trajectories that are driving change for women:



### 1. Changing consumer demand



### 2. Digitalization



### 3. Supply chain diversification



### 4. Fragmentation of the trade and investment landscape



### 5. Role of government to support small businesses



### 6. Growing momentum to 'build back better'



## Life at a crossroads: Action or no action?

Women entrepreneurs are starting to face additional obstacles related to shifts in both global value chains and the policy environment. These challenges range from accessing information, skills, resources and networks to integrating into public procurement markets, navigating export and import procedures or infrastructure issues, and ensuring that governments act on their commitments to women's economic empowerment.

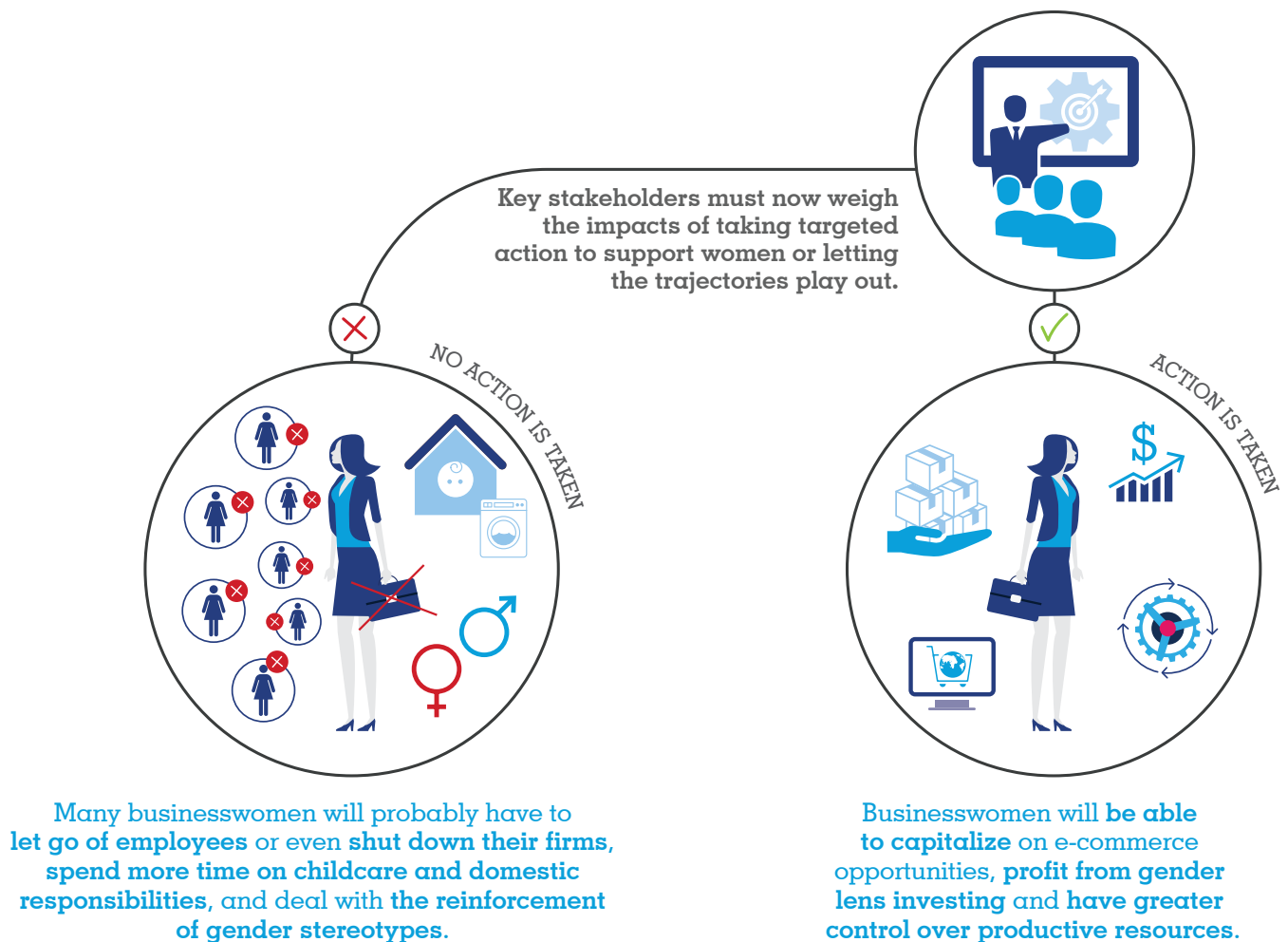
Key stakeholders must now weigh the impacts of taking targeted action to support women or letting the trajectories play out.

If no action is taken, many businesswomen will probably have to let go of employees or even shut down their firms, spend more time on childcare and domestic responsibilities, and deal with the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. They will also struggle to take advantage of new market opportunities and government support packages.








If action is taken, however, businesswomen will be able to capitalize on e-commerce opportunities, profit from gender lens investing and have greater control over productive resources. They will contribute more to gross domestic product and have greater influence and decision-making power.

## Recommendations to build back better

The consequences of inaction would be dire. More global cooperation and support from different stakeholder groups are a fundamental part of the solution. Corporations, policymakers and the international community should consider the following recommendations to make a difference, within their capacity, towards meaningful change.



**Table 1 Steps for stakeholders to make a difference**

ACTIONS FOR CORPORATIONS	<p>Action 1: Increasing women's participation in corporate supply chains</p> 	<p>1.1 Consider preferential schemes for women suppliers; 1.2 Provide incentives to suppliers to include more women in their supply chains; 1.3 Ensure services reach women in supply chains; 1.4 Partner with organizations with certified women suppliers; 1.5 Ensure open and transparent procurement procedures; 1.6 Provide clear and accessible guidelines for selection criteria; 1.7 Give productive feedback on procurement tenders.</p>
	<p>Action 2: Employing flexible supply chain financing options</p> 	<p>2.1 Agree to competitive interest rates; 2.2 Provide prompt and advance payments to suppliers; 2.3 Create competitive finance schemes based on sustainability criteria; 2.4 Encourage the use of a supply chain financier; 2.5 Provide asset-based financing and bank guarantees for women-led enterprises.</p>
	<p>Action 3: Providing targeted training for women-led businesses</p> 	<p>3.1 Support the digitalization of businesses through training and advice; 3.2 Create tailored training for women-led businesses in logistics and standards; 3.3 Share corporate toolkits on crisis management; 3.4 Encourage women-led businesses to join SheTrades Initiative; 3.5 Deliver gender responsiveness and diversity training to suppliers.</p>
ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS	<p>Action 4: Supporting women's access to finance and financial services</p> 	<p>4.1 Create incentive mechanisms for the private sector to lend to women (e.g. gender bonds); 4.2 Encourage financing options that match needs of women-led small and medium-sized enterprises; 4.3 Give women-led firms preferences under support programmes for small and medium-sized enterprises; 4.4 Offer women-led companies options to defer financial obligations for a short period; 4.5 Provide assistance with financial literacy and investment-readiness; 4.6 Consider gender lens investing approaches to address inequalities.</p>
	<p>Action 5: Boosting women's participation in public procurement opportunities</p> 	<p>5.1 Ensure tender information is clear and accessible in a timely manner; 5.2 Collect gender-disaggregated data on the award of public tenders; 5.3 Use available data to reach out to women entrepreneurs; 5.4 Offer training to women-led firms on procurement processes; 5.5 Set up help desks to assist bidders to improve transparency and simplify procurement processes; 5.6 Encourage accountability among procuring officers to avoid late payments to women suppliers; 5.7 Develop gender-responsive public procurement policies.</p>
	<p>Action 6: Promoting solutions for continuity of business</p> 	<p>6.1 Offer a bailout package with allocations for women-led firms; 6.2 Provide subsidized processing and equipment and inputs; 6.3 Help business support institutions create sustainable crisis management plans for firms through state-sponsored training; 6.4 Create incentives so small women-led companies avoid layoffs in hard-hit sectors; 6.5 Design adjustment policies to help enterprises in long-term affected sectors; 6.6 Support digitalization of women-led businesses; 6.7 Join coordinated action to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises during the recovery.</p>
ACTIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY	<p>Action 7: Strengthening global cooperation</p> 	<p>7.1 Monitor the impacts of trade measures; 7.2 Ensure response policies are fair and inclusive; 7.3 Renew commitment to women empowerment fora; 7.4 Promote sustainable joint recovery efforts; 7.5 Leverage networks of women-led businesses.</p>
	<p>Action 8: Driving change for women through W20</p> 	<p>8.1 Develop comprehensive gender-inclusive policy frameworks; 8.2 Provide incentivized support for women-led businesses; 8.3 Encourage an investment environment with a gender lens; 8.4 Set goals to track progress on women's economic participation; 8.5 Invest in women's access to and participation in technology.</p>
	<p>Action 9: Supporting digital literacy and use of digital technologies</p> 	<p>9.1 Provide digital skills training for women entrepreneurs; 9.2 Support increased internet penetration where needed; 9.3 Assess barriers to women's access to mobile and digital services; 9.4 Fully integrate gender equality in digital strategies and initiatives; 9.5 Encourage greater representation of women in leadership.</p>





## CHAPTER 1

# SETTING THE SCENE

COVID-19 has drastically transformed the business and policy landscape in which companies and governments operate. Global value chains, which account for almost half of international trade, have suffered multiple and overlapping shocks in terms of changing consumer demand, disrupted supply networks and logistics, labour shortages and acceleration in the adoption of technologies. Extensive government interventions with such significant implications for the trade and investment regimes underpinning global value chains would have been unimaginable in the past.

We have learned from previous crises that women tend to be disproportionately affected as workers, producers, business owners and individuals both at home and in society. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, women entrepreneurs faced barriers when seeking resources to help them launch and grow successful businesses. Now, with the economic ramifications disproportionately affecting women, we risk reversing progress made towards gender parity. Yet with proper support, women entrepreneurs and women-led businesses can play a central role in the economic recovery.

Even though women own about a third of the world's micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, they own or manage just 20% of exporting firms. Because they tend to be smaller, these firms are usually more affected by fixed costs, volatile international prices and trade-related regulations and obstacles.

Pandemic-induced disruptions to the global economy have significant negative implications for women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). But they also open a unique opportunity to transform supply chains and policymaking to put women in business at the centre of our recovery path.

Women also face challenges in the labour market (although this is not a focus of this paper). Already burdened by labour market disadvantages and systemic inequalities, women have been disproportionately affected by job loss, reduced working hours and bankruptcy due to the pandemic. Women make up a high share of workers in sectors and roles that are more susceptible to economic downturns and offer less social protection – such as agriculture, manufacturing and hospitality. These sectors depend on international supply chain processes, which have been suspended or hindered.

This crisis calls for immediate and long-term action, as most of the workers on the front lines of the pandemic are women. In addition, there are asymmetrical shocks to women around the world in labour markets, in the informal sector and as caregivers and parents.

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*'Empowering women economically, including through their greater involvement in trade, will contribute to addressing inequality and to achieving sustainable economic growth and the Sustainable Development Goals. Supporting women's entrepreneurship by adopting gender-sensitive global trade policies is critical to economic recovery now and for future crisis-cushioning.'*

*Thoraya Obaid,  
Chair, Women 20*

Promoting gender equality in response to the crisis could add \$13 trillion to global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030 compared to a gender-regressive scenario (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020a). With adequate and proper support, women-led businesses can play a major role in the economic recovery and job creation. Ensuring that women can reach their full potential would help tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

In these extraordinary times, we have an opportunity to ensure that the momentum of gender equality does not regress as we rebuild our economies and provide the framework and regulations for women entrepreneurs to succeed in the post-COVID-19 era. This goal is now more important than ever. There is no ‘build back better’ in the recovery without gender equality.

This policy brief focuses on the participation of women-led firms and women entrepreneurs in value chains in the COVID-19 economic recovery in developed and developing countries. It is based on insights and contributions from ministers; lead firms such as Li & Fung Group, Mastercard, UPS and Walmart; women-led SMEs; international organizations and world-renowned experts.

The next two chapters examine key trajectories of change in the global economic landscape. Chapter 2 presents three trajectories driving changes in global value chains, while Chapter 3 turns to trajectories in the economic policy space. These dynamics may affect the participation of women-led SMEs and businesswomen in specific ways.

Based on a survey of global experts, each chapter introduces two scenarios. The first scenario is ‘business as usual’, where corporates, policymakers and the international community do not adopt targeted strategies to support women’s entrepreneurship. In the second scenario, they do.

Based on these insights, the final chapter puts forward action points for corporates, policymakers and the international community.



# OPEN

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H.E. Dr. Isatou Touray

Vice President,  
the Gambia

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs and the economy

The coronavirus pandemic caught most countries unprepared and has affected the world economy and international relations. The pandemic's effects have been social, economic, cultural and political. An unprecedented number of deaths and the absence, to date, of a cure to arrest the scourge are influencing development strategies and the manner in which we engage in business.

COVID-19 has had differential impacts on our populations – with policymakers often pursuing a balancing act between protecting lives and preserving livelihoods. The public health measures put in place – such as social distancing, various degrees of lockdown and other restrictions – have negative ramifications for people's livelihoods, but also constitute a life-saving strategy.

In the Gambia, these initial health measures covered the suspension of all public gatherings, including restrictions on daily markets and closures of weekly markets commonly known as lumos. The effect of these policy decisions has specific gender impacts.

The lumos are important centres for buying and selling food items, livestock and products of farmers in rural areas with high incidences of poverty. These markets are spaces where women can look forward to engaging in business activities as well as other social interactions. A report by the Ministry of Agriculture has shown that the effects of the suspension of the lumos are already being felt, as many farmers – a majority of whom are women – have nowhere to sell their harvest.

To protect these farmers, the government, through various ministries, has devised strategies such as supporting women onion producers by buying their products to mitigate the losses induced by public health measures.

More generally, women entrepreneurs need to be given the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with policymakers and businesses in which their needs and priorities to engage effectively with the economy in this extraordinary period are heard.

In addition, raising awareness about the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable groups is essential. A government study on the socioeconomic impacts on women and girls highlights issues such as safety, freedom and family care. School closures, for example, can lead to abuse, deteriorating health and a higher burden of household responsibility on women's shoulders.

The environment, socioeconomic and health nexus that the pandemic has brought to light calls for doing business and development differently – not least by addressing entrenched gender imbalances and injustices. Our development policies will have to be redefined to respond to the impacts of COVID-19 and adapt to the new realities faced by our economy. This calls for a gender-sensitive approach that responds to the need for economic justice.

In line with the objective set out in this policy brief – that is, to encourage effective action in support of women entrepreneurs as the economy and international trade recover from the disruptions caused by the pandemic – it is important that we sharpen our gender lens. I would like to draw attention to five areas of intervention.

First, procurement policies must be gender-responsive and governments should be supported to achieve this goal.

Second, additional resources must be devoted to building the capacity of women-led firms.

Third, the interface between women farmers and business should be strengthened to improve product quality and enhance competitiveness.

Fourth, further promoting gender equality in trade requires women in the private sector to be prepared.

Finally, gender-based violence must be addressed.



## CHAPTER 2

# BUILDING BETTER GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended business models designed around carefully constructed supply chains and cross-border distribution networks. Some of the trajectories identified in this chapter that are driving changes in global value chains represent an acceleration of previous trends. Others are more abrupt transformations likely to have long-term implications for how lead firms and suppliers, including small firms, operate.

With overlaps, digitalization broadly falls under the former category, while changing consumer demand and supply chain diversification can be included in the latter.

### Trajectories driving change in global value chains



#### Trajectory 1: Changing consumer demand

The impact of COVID-19 on consumer demand is complex, changes over time and varies by country and sector. The pandemic had an immediate impact on certain sectors, characterized by a surge in demand for essential goods such as medicines, groceries and household supplies as well as home entertainment, and a plunge in demand for travel and transportation, apparel, outside entertainment and other non-essentials.

According to McKinsey COVID-19 Consumer Pulse surveys, trends in consumer behaviour amid the pandemic include price sensitivity, a shift to essential goods, changes in brand preferences, growth in e-commerce, greater preferences for healthy and hygienic packaging, and a shift to the 'homebody' economy (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Some of these changes are expected to revert to pre-pandemic patterns, but others are likely to remain as longer-term trends.

The June 2020 EY Future Consumer Index suggests that five consumer segments will drive demand post-pandemic (with different weights across age and income groups): consumers who prioritize affordability; consumers who put great importance on health and safety; consumers who are willing to pay a premium for ethically sourced and sustainable goods and services; consumers who prefer brands that are mindful of their social impacts; and consumers, mostly young, who primarily seek an 'experience' (EY, 2020).

The ability of firms – buyers, suppliers and service providers in the value chain – to adjust to changing consumer demand will be critical and may require different capabilities and various degrees of agility across sectors. Companies that successfully adapt will identify opportunities to replace physical with digital processes, diversify products and services, and gain consumer trust.

*'Economic disruptions, lockdowns and market closures have had enormous effects on smallholder farmers, particularly women, pushing them deeper into poverty and generating greater food insecurity. New ways of engaging with the market are necessary to support farmers. Global supply chains must be rebuilt to adapt to constant disruptions, balancing efficiency with flexibility to ensure resilience and protection of the most vulnerable.'*

*Julie Gehrki,  
Vice President  
of Philanthropy,  
Walmart*



## Trajectory 2: Digitalization

Technological innovation – such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, machine learning, automation and the Internet of Things – has major implications for global and regional value chains and, more broadly, for economic growth and employment. The adoption of digital technologies was already transforming value chain processes and the management of supplier networks before the pandemic. A 2016 survey found that 72% of 2,000 respondents expected their enterprises to have fully digitalized their supply chains within the next five years (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2016).

It is generally acknowledged that restrictions designed to combat the SARS outbreak in 2003 hastened the adoption of e-commerce in China (Economist, 2020a). Recent data suggest that COVID-19 will have a similar, albeit deeper and more widespread, impact with a rapid migration on the part of businesses and consumers to digital technologies (McKinsey Digital, 2020).

COVID-19 may permanently alter the working patterns of firms as employees embrace working from home and business travel remains reduced due to the cost and time advantages of remote meetings. This may have a ripple effect on retail and services in city centres, among others.

While the drop in global demand resulting from pandemic-related lockdowns has had a disproportionate impact on small businesses, digital technologies continue to represent a tool for development and growth. Today, these technologies allow small firms to be 'born global' and access both international and domestic markets from the outset.

SMEs, however, are not a homogenous group. The impact of COVID-19 on their strategies and success will depend partly on the type of value chain in which they participate, their function within the value chain segment and the intensity of technological adoption.



## Trajectory 3: Supply chain diversification

Research by McKinsey Global Institute (2020b) has found that for 180 key traded products across value chains, a single country accounts for more than 70% of exports. This concentration is true not only at the country level, but also at the firm level, as value chains have experienced a high degree of consolidation over the past couple of decades. The vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19 could trigger a shift away from limited- (and even single-) source dependencies towards multi-level sourcing.

The pandemic has highlighted the fragility of global value chains and the risks associated with an over-reliance on a limited number of manufacturing hubs. Some lead firms are ramping up their efforts to 'reshore' or move production back to their domestic markets. Political pressures and regulatory incentives in several countries are encouraging this trend.

At the same time, digital technologies are making reshoring or nearshoring (moving production closer to a home market) easier by levelling out the advantages of low-cost locations through automation, boosting productivity and enhancing flexibility. This re-engineering of value chains could benefit SMEs in countries and regions that are geographically near markets at the forefront of repatriation efforts.

It is difficult to identify which value chains will be most affected by the turn towards reshoring and nearshoring. Research by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization in 2019 suggests that high-technology firms are more likely to reshore their operations than businesses operating in low-technology sectors. While reshoring is likely to increase in a post-pandemic world, offshoring to a diverse network of supplier firms will remain an attractive option for many retailers and multinationals.



Hon. Lucas Palacios

Minister of Economy,  
Development and Tourism,  
Chile

## THOUGHT LEADER

# The urgent need to universalize access to digital platforms and technologies

**C**OVID-19 is reshaping the policy landscape worldwide. The latest figures have revealed the enormous effects that this pandemic is having on Chilean families and on the economy.

The essential role of governments has emerged globally at the forefront to safeguard the lives of our citizens and address the crisis. The public policies that countries put into practice are key to overcome this critical situation. Contractions in trade and growth are prompting policymakers to consider a range of stimulus packages and other economic measures to support countries' recovery.

In the case of Chile, several measures implemented by the government and the central bank will facilitate the way out of the deep recession we are experiencing.

We have intensified policy efforts to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in coping with this crisis and help them to save their businesses, their sources of income and employment, and those of many families working in them. The pandemic has also forced us to abruptly change the way we conduct our daily activities to do them digitally as much as possible, including work, education, shopping, doctor visits and interactions with the government.

This shift has revealed the needs and challenges we have in these areas, mainly in universal access to digital platforms.

While stimulus packages are transitory measures, the use of digital technologies and the need to skill all our society to adapt to this new reality is urgent. As government, we will continue with the aim of universalizing the use of these technologies as a long-term policy.

For example, this crisis has highlighted the value of promoting digital signatures, which could replace the need for notarial certification. This is especially important in Chile, as hundreds of citizens visit public notary offices every day for many different procedures, such as certification of signatures, obtaining certified copies and signature of labour settlements. To comply with social distancing guidelines to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission, the Chilean Government has identified the need to promote the use of digital signatures.

Also, the rapid growth of e-commerce since the beginning of the pandemic means more legal protection for the consumer is needed. Our Congress is discussing a new bill that would update our consumer law on these matters. This is also one of the new top priorities for our government, as e-commerce is likely to be the main commercial channel for years to come.

Therefore, a key recommendation is to equip our people with the right skills to seize the opportunities of the so-called fourth industrial revolution.





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### Sheila Alumo

Managing Director, Eastern Agricultural Development Company

## CASE STUDY

# Adjusting to a new normal in Uganda

**E**astern Agricultural Development Company, like many other small and medium-sized enterprises in Uganda, has suffered unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19. The core of our business is bulk trading of fresh sweet potatoes and dry beans with small-scale processing. We work with a vast network of more than 2,000 smallholder farmers. During this period, we have suffered from low production, market volatility and staff downsizing, among others.

Because we rely on smallholder farmers as our production and supply chain, low or no production for us means no business. Most of our buyers are European and Middle Eastern and local schools and regional traders for the non-export grade sweet potatoes and beans. With the imposition of lockdowns globally, the ban on air travel and school and border closings, it has been practically impossible to conduct business.

Even though countries are easing lockdowns, borders are being opened for trade and air transport is restarting. Food prices have dropped tremendously, and the market remains volatile. For instance, as we were gearing up to resume our supplies/trade, buyers of our fresh sweet potatoes got in touch with us with a revised price offer that was 20% lower than the original offer.

We have had to readjust to the new normal. We have embraced information and communication technologies in our activities, especially in coordinating with farmers to produce while mobility and the concentration of people remain restricted. We have also partnered with a local commercial bank to facilitate the process of access to input loans for farmers through a digital platform. We are slowly evolving from cash to cashless payments.

'It takes a village to raise a child.' We cannot tackle a problem as multifaceted as this alone, but together we can create the difference we wish to see!

## Making global value chains work for women’s entrepreneurship

Women-led exporting businesses earn more, employ more people and pay higher wages than non-exporting firms (ITC, 2015). As women-led companies expand their reach, they employ more women. The share of women working in women-owned firms that trade globally is as high as 66%, compared with 39% for enterprises trading in the home region.

Ownership also influences women in leadership positions. For example, 85% of women-led SMEs have female chief executives, chief operating officers or chief financial officers. Additionally, the share of women-led firms doubles when moving from traditional offline trade to cross-border e-commerce (ITC, 2017).

In many countries, women-led SMEs face higher hurdles to do business than their men-led equivalents. Globally, women spend two to 10 times more time on unpaid care work than men. For women entrepreneurs, the burden of childcare, elderly care and household chores has become significantly heavier during the COVID-19 pandemic as schools and day-care facilities close and relatives fall ill.



In addition, disruptions in global value chains are likely to be more severe for women-led companies. For example, due to varying degrees in digital literacy skills and the existence of a gender divide in this area, women entrepreneurs may encounter difficulties transitioning towards e-commerce and investing in new technologies.

In light of the three trajectories driving change in global value chains presented in this chapter, women entrepreneurs will have to navigate the post-pandemic landscape and tackle a set of challenges listed in Table 2.

*‘Female entrepreneurs confront a range of gender-specific societal, educational, technological, trade and business-related constraints that make their businesses less competitive and productive than those owned by men. In a scenario where no action is taken to support businesses, barriers that prevent these women-owned businesses from participating in high-value activities in regional and global value chains will increase and become more entrenched.’*

*Nadira Bayat,  
Gender and Trade Consultant,  
United Nations Economic  
Commission for Africa*

**Table 2** Challenges in post-pandemic value chains

Trajectories	Potential challenges
<b>Changing consumer demand</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to information to understand shifting consumer demand</li> <li>Access to resources to move/upgrade to different value chains and/or different functions within the value chain</li> <li>Access to information and capital to acquire relevant certifications and comply with voluntary sustainability standards</li> </ul>
<b>Digitalization</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to skills and capital to move their businesses online</li> <li>Lack of digital literacy skills</li> <li>Access to capital to invest in automation and/or digital processes</li> <li>Access to affordable and reliable internet</li> </ul>
<b>Supply chain diversification</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prompt access to market information to mitigate risks and adjust business models</li> <li>Access to skills and capital required to adjust production lines and meet new sourcing criteria of lead firms</li> <li>Access to formal and informal business networks with new buyers and suppliers</li> </ul>



Given the severe impact of COVID-19 on small businesses and the challenges associated not only with loss of revenue and supply chain disruptions, but also with the need to adapt to marked shifts in the organization of value chains, businesswomen are in dire need of both technical and financial support. Many small firms and women-led enterprises, in particular, are hanging by a thread and are at a crossroads.

Women-led companies may receive the support they need from businesses, governments and the international community, and survive the crisis. Or, they may not receive the requisite support, and risk going out of businesses – with lasting social and economic consequences.

This policy brief asked 15 international gender experts to envision how the future of business and society would look under two scenarios. One is a scenario of business as usual, where corporations, policymakers and the global community take no action to support women-led SMEs. Under the second scenario, purposive action is taken to support these enterprises.

Table 3 illustrates these best- and worst-case scenarios and paints a picture of the different outcomes by applying a gender lens.

*“No action” is a total disaster scenario. Women would be disproportionately affected due to all the gender-based constraints, which in turn would affect families and, by extension, entire countries would deal with the negative fallout.’*

*Dorothy Tuma,  
Business Consultant*

**Table 3 Action versus no action: Very different outcomes**

Scenario 1: No action is taken	Scenario 2: Action is taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Women-led firms must let go of employees, who are most likely women, as they tend to have workforces that are predominantly female.</li> <li>■ Women going out of business disrupt supply chains and result in the loss of key backward and forward linkages.</li> <li>■ Women become more financially reliant on men and risk losing their social status in their family and community. They suffer lasting psychological effects from having to close their business.</li> <li>■ Women-led companies are unable to dedicate as much time to their businesses as they have to attend to childcare and domestic responsibilities due to quarantine restrictions, teleworking and gender norms.</li> <li>■ Advances made in the realm of equity in the business arena are reversed and strides made in gaining equal access to business opportunities are undone. Value chain disruption accentuates existing segregation in the labour market.</li> <li>■ Women-led enterprises are insufficiently equipped to adjust and respond adequately to new market opportunities.</li> <li>■ Women-led firms (operating, for example, as suppliers in developing countries in agriculture or tourism value chains) fall into informality and situations of economic vulnerability and deprivation (along with their families). Single-mother households are especially affected.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Women-led firms provide more employment opportunities, leading to greater women’s participation in the workforce and faster and inclusive economic growth.</li> <li>■ Women-led businesses get support to take advantage of e-commerce opportunities, enabling them to connect to new markets and reach new customers.</li> <li>■ Women benefit from a conducive ecosystem in which access to quality control systems and logistics management, among other tools, are no longer out of financial or technical reach.</li> <li>■ Women get greater control of productive resources, which results in improved self-reliance as well as increased income and investment in children’s health, nutrition and education – as part of the wider benefits for families and communities.</li> <li>■ Gender constraints tied to physical mobility and domestic responsibilities are reduced through access to digital technologies and related opportunities for women entrepreneurs to provide goods and services in supply chains through e-commerce.</li> <li>■ Lead firms generate positive returns in terms of both financial and social impact from investing in women-led businesses along the value chain and increasing the share of women-led enterprises in sourcing and procurement contracts.</li> </ul>



## CHAPTER 3

# BUILDING BETTER POLICY ECOSYSTEMS

The national and international policy landscape in which global value chains are engineered and economic agents operate has changed considerably in response to the pandemic. As with the trajectories affecting supply chains, some of these policy shifts represent an acceleration of underlying trends. Others are unprecedented and potentially mark a more profound modification, including in the conduct of international trade.

### Trajectories driving change in the economic policy landscape

This chapter identifies three broad trajectories: global fragmentation, government support and a 'build back better' approach to business and the economy. It then assesses how policy reforms could affect women-led businesses and small enterprises.



#### Trajectory 4: Fragmentation of the trade and investment landscape

The rate of trade liberalization has declined and barriers to trade have increased in the last few years (Evenett and Fritz, 2019). A report by the World Trade Organization (WTO) indicates that 80 countries have imposed export restrictions or prohibitions since the start of the pandemic (WTO, 2020a).

ITC's Market Access Map (2020) also tracks and monitors temporary COVID-19 restrictions and trade measures. While most of these restrictions have focused on medical supplies, some have targeted agricultural products.

Global value chains amplify the costs caused by tariffs and barriers to trade – inputs into production processes often cross borders multiple times and, as a result, are subject to accumulating costs of protection (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). In an interdependent global economy, such distortions are transmitted throughout the system. It remains to be seen whether trade barriers abate after the pandemic.

A combination of key services involved in the logistics sector – including transportation, delivery and freight forwarding – promote efficiency to the supply chain and rely on predictable forecasting. In response to the crisis, many governments designated logistics-related services as 'essential,' thereby exempting them from lockdown measures. However, some pandemic-induced operational constraints have led to delivery delays, congestion and higher freight rates – to which can be added policy reactions that have negatively affected the ability of carriers to support traders.

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*'The COVID-19 crisis will cause a huge reset in many aspects of commerce and trade.'*

*Virginia Littlejohn,  
President,  
Quantum Leaps*

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*'Women will help to grow the economy and change the way business is done, so that both are more inclusive and impactful.'*

*Elizabeth Vazquez,  
Chief Executive Officer  
and Co-Founder,  
WeConnect International*

In an effort to minimize disruption to cross-border trade in goods, the World Customs Organization and the WTO have urged their members to 'ensure that any new border action is targeted, proportionate, transparent and non-discriminatory', and rescind them once they are no longer needed (WTO, 2020b).

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development expects global foreign direct investment flows to fall as much 40% in 2020–2021 – reaching their lowest level in two decades (UNCTAD, 2020). Policy responses to the pandemic with respect to capital flows have varied. Some countries have tightened rules around foreign direct investment in strategic sectors including healthcare and technology, while others have initiated measures designed to promote and facilitate foreign investment. On the other side of the ledger, certain countries have expanded their screening regimes by broadening disclosure requirements, increasing the scope of sectors subject to review and lengthening timeframes for review. The trajectory of global foreign direct investment flows post-COVID-19 will ultimately be influenced by the nature of measures implemented by governments and whether value chains do in fact undergo a process of reshoring and nearshoring.



### Trajectory 5: Government support to small businesses

Countries around the world have put in place unprecedented measures to stabilize their economies and support businesses and individuals. Conservative estimates of the size of fiscal stimulus measures suggest that government spending related to COVID-19 will exceed 2% of global GDP, which dwarfs the size of government responses to the 2008 global financial crisis (Economist, 2020b).

While the full magnitude of state interventions in national economies remains unknown, it is clear that the equilibrium of the state-market relationship has been altered in many nations. The jury is still out as to whether this is temporary or if it marks an evolutionary shift in the nature of capitalism and the models governing economic policymaking (Braga and Cabral, 2020).

The impacts of COVID-19 have been severe for firms of all sizes. However, SMEs have been particularly hard hit by the downturn in supply and demand, due to their lower capacity to absorb shocks relative to their larger counterparts.

Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development indicate that income and tax referrals, loan guarantees, direct lending and wage subsidies have been the most commonly used support measures for SMEs. There are additional policy tools, such as grants and debt moratoria.

For small companies that do not have access to state support measures, either because they are not eligible or because their governments lack the necessary fiscal resources, the picture looks grim – with many risking bankruptcy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).



### Trajectory 6: Growing momentum to 'build back better'

Many global stakeholders – from multilateral institutions and governments to the corporate sector – are joining the call to take a 'build back better' approach to the recovery. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the interdependence of economic policy, public health and nature.

Economic development relies on a healthy environment, while the state of the natural environment has an impact on health outcomes (International Labour Organization, 2020). The easing of shutdowns and the resumption of economic activity represents a chance to course-correct and design and implement policies that bring the world on a trajectory to sustainable development.

At the multilateral level, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations have called on countries to use their stimulus measures to invest in green technologies and jobs. The F20 – a network of foundations that work for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and compliance with the Paris climate agreement – urged the Group of 20 (G20) to acknowledge the imperative to build back better, including by addressing the interlinked global challenges of public health, climate change and biodiversity loss (F20, 2020).

As another example, a coalition of more than 1,200 global companies has appealed to governments to pair recovery action with climate action (We Mean Business, 2020).

While many of these initiatives focus on environmental concerns, 'build back better' clearly encompasses issues of inequality and social justice. This includes the achievement of gender equality and the imperative of an inclusive agenda for excluded and vulnerable groups. Only a deliberate and strategic focus on women-led businesses will ensure that the approach succeeds.



**Maria Fernanda Garza**

President and Chief  
Executive Officer,  
Orestia

## CASE STUDY

# Nearshoring and new forms of competition in Mexico

**O**restia is a Mexican woman-led business specialized in manufacturing water-saving plumbing products. The company exports to North, Central and South America and Asia.

In the past, lead firms outsourced the tooling and manufacturing of product parts to China. Since 2012, however, most of these activities have been relocated to Mexico. Only the most complex product parts are still being sourced from Asia and North America.

Because of nearshoring, Orestia was able to increase its production capacity and lower costs. Manufacturing in smaller production runs translated into more efficient inventory management, lower working capital and faster customer response.

Deteriorating confidence in global suppliers due to the pandemic means nearshoring is accelerating and more companies will relocate to sources closer to their consumers. Increasingly, companies will resort to process automation as a response to labour shortages.

To be able to build better and stronger after the pandemic, small firms will need specific support to adapt to these new trends in global value chains. In addition to adapting their business models to these nearshoring and automation trends, SMEs, including women-led businesses, will need assistance to adapt to rapid digitalization.

Extensive efforts should be made to reduce barriers to digital transformation, designing a policy and regulatory environment that enables innovation, welcomes new entrants into the digital ecosystem and values new forms of competition.



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## THOUGHT LEADER

# A robust and inclusive rules-based system will help us emerge stronger

**Hon. Mary Ng**

Minister of Small Business,  
Export Promotion and  
International Trade,  
Canada

**F**or people around the world, this has been an extraordinarily difficult time. No person, community or country has been spared from the COVID-19 pandemic, and many have been disproportionately affected – women, small firms, lower-income families and indigenous communities, among others.

As COVID-19 spread, many countries responded by increasing barriers to trade and breaking down global supply chains. But COVID-19 should not – cannot – be used as an excuse to stop trading or to turn inward.

As Canada’s minister responsible for international trade, it is my firm belief that our people and small businesses will be much better off with more global cooperation, greater access to international markets and increased transparency and predictability – not less.

Canada embraces its role in leading this global conversation. Throughout this crisis, Canada has been working closely with our international partners from the G20, the World Trade Organization, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and others to lessen the economic consequences of COVID-19 and keep supply chains open for the benefit of Canadians and people around the world.

In June 2020, I hosted a virtual meeting with my international counterparts in the Ottawa Group on WTO reform. Our like-minded countries worked together to sign onto an action plan committing to advancing negotiations on e-commerce, enhanced transparency on export restrictions, predictable and open trade in agriculture, more streamlined movement of goods and services, exploring a potential new WTO initiative to allow for medical supplies to flow more easily, and greater engagement with businesses and stakeholders.

This important work will strengthen the rules-based trading system and ensure our people are safe and supported during the pandemic, and on the road to economic recovery.

Without this ongoing work, our people wouldn’t have access to essential goods that they need, like food and medical supplies. Our businesses would see more instability in these uncertain times. And we wouldn’t have been able to maintain vital air and sea links that helped bring our citizens home safely at the onset of this global pandemic.



Now, more than ever, we must continue to strengthen our rules-based global trading system so that it is robust and resilient, even in times of crisis.

And as we work towards economic recovery, now is the time to ensure diversity and inclusion are at the core of our systems – an inclusive approach to trade will make our countries more resilient, sustainable and better able to adapt to and withstand turbulent times.

Ensuring that everyone – including small companies, women entrepreneurs, indigenous-owned businesses and other underrepresented exporters – benefits from international trade can reduce poverty, support a better quality of life and create more opportunities for people now and for generations to come.

This, along with ensuring workers and families are safe, healthy and financially supported through this crisis, is an essential part of Canada's efforts to foster a resilient economic restart and recovery.

The path forward is clear. We must all come together as a global community to champion the kind of inclusive and rules-based trade that will help people and businesses around the world overcome the impacts of the pandemic, and emerge stronger and more resilient than ever.

## Making policy reforms work for women’s entrepreneurship

Policymakers, corporations and the international community can capitalize on the growing momentum to ‘build back better’ and seize this historic opportunity to reimagine how business is conducted and pursue policies that drive sustainable and inclusive growth. As SMEs are the backbone of many economies, representing some 70% of employment worldwide, creating an enabling policy environment for small businesses and women entrepreneurs, in particular, will be critical to a resilient and gender-equitable recovery in the post-COVID-19 era.


Women are too often excluded from policy formulation and consultation processes, and their voices are not always audible or present at the decision-making table. In many countries, men largely make key decisions about COVID-19 lockdowns, containment, support and recovery (The Guardian, 2020).

In the same way that the pandemic has gendered impacts, trade outcomes are also not gender-neutral due to a combination of sociocultural, political and economic factors. Policies aimed at supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship have not always taken into account women’s positions in value chains, their multiple roles in society or their access to assets, skills and networks.

The lack of sex-disaggregated data to support a gender mainstreaming process and the design of gender-responsive policies does not help. Countries have not invested enough – or at all – in such data, including in trade-related fields, which would help policymakers to better understand institutional and regulatory gaps that affect women in business. This shortcoming is compounded by the fact that gender is often addressed in silos rather than as a cross-cutting issue.

Table 4 highlights some of the potential challenges that women-led SMEs and women entrepreneurs face in the three broad policy trajectories identified in this chapter.

**Table 4** Challenges in the post-pandemic policy landscape

Trajectories	Potential challenges
<b>Fragmentation of the trade and investment landscape</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Limited in-house resources to dedicate to multiple export and import procedures and standards</li> <li>▪ High trading costs in the form of non-tariff measures, burdensome customs management and poor trade infrastructure and logistics services</li> </ul>
<b>Government support to small businesses</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inadequate assessments of impacts and needs of women-led firms due to limited collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data</li> <li>▪ Women’s voices are marginalized, resulting in poor access to information on criteria to qualify for government support and the exclusion of microenterprises and self-employed women entrepreneurs</li> <li>▪ No inclusivity or sustainability requirements in support programmes to large businesses, and poor coordination between economic and social policies</li> </ul>
<b>Growing momentum to ‘build back better’</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gender equality goals lack visibility in the hierarchy of policy priorities</li> <li>▪ Partial linkages on women’s empowerment between government commitments contained in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action</li> </ul>

Although there are well-defined areas for improvement and an appetite to create more resilient and sustainable value chains in the post-COVID-19 era, this sentiment is by no means universal and there is no guarantee that the opportunity will be seized. The plight of women entrepreneurs, and gender equality more broadly, is at an inflection point that can go one of two ways. Ephemeral political will can be harnessed to provide comprehensive support for the development of women-led businesses, or it can be passed over in favour of the status quo.

As in Chapter 2, this policy brief sourced feedback from 15 international gender experts to depict two opposing scenarios: what the future of business and society will look like if corporates, policymakers and the global community take action, or not, to support women's entrepreneurship and women-led SMEs in the new policy landscape. Table 5 illustrates potential outcomes of these scenarios.

*'The pandemic has revealed both the fragility of the recent progress regarding gender equality and women's empowerment on a global scale, and the absolute necessity of moving forward more quickly and more deeply. If no particular action is taken in the post-COVID-19 crisis to support women employees and women-led companies, then one can easily predict that the economic crisis will not only last longer, but be coupled with a severe social and human crisis.'*

*Etienne Parizot,  
Professor,  
Université de Paris,  
and founding member of  
#JamaisSansElles*

**Table 5** 'Action' versus 'no action' scenarios

Scenario 1: No action is taken	Scenario 2: Action is taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The lack of financial and technical support from governments will result in many women-led businesses closing down.</li> <li>■ The negative economic effects will be larger, not only for female business owners and their workers, but also for governments due to loss of tax revenues and having to pay unemployment benefits.</li> <li>■ If there is no support or policies around childcare and both parents cannot go back to work, families could revert to more traditional organization systems, which could lead to the reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes.</li> <li>■ Accessing information to apply for and comply with requirements to benefit from governments' support packages (which may not be tailored to the needs of women-led firms) becomes more difficult.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises internationalize on a sustainable basis (partly supported by aid for trade interventions).</li> <li>■ Women-led businesses play an even greater role in contributing to GDP and help drive the economic recovery and social development.</li> <li>■ COVID-19 becomes a catalyst for accelerating gender equality and women's economic empowerment in all regions of the world.</li> <li>■ Gender-sensitive ecosystems enable women-led businesses to be full partners and have a voice in discussions around value chain structures and policy priorities in the recovery.</li> </ul>





**John W.H. Denton AO**

Secretary-General,  
International Chamber of  
Commerce

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Save Our SMEs campaign: A rallying call of long-term relevance

The International Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1919 – in the wake of the First World War and during the Spanish flu pandemic – on the conviction that international commercial exchanges are conducive to both greater global prosperity and peace among nations. A century on, we remain convinced that open world trade is essential to delivering peace, prosperity and opportunity for all.

Regrettably, however, the notion of open world trade underpinned by a rules-based multilateral system has been increasingly challenged in recent years. Indeed, the current health and socioeconomic crisis has only exacerbated this situation, with serious implications for SMEs and for women entrepreneurs in particular.

Trade had been on a steady decline since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, with new barriers erected with increasing frequency even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. This has, of course, dramatically reduced world trade.

Unfortunately, behind many of the actions undermining the multilateral trading system is a misconception that open trade causes social and economic ills, rather than being one of the key instruments in the policy tool kit that contributes to their amelioration. ICC considers that creating more opportunities for SMEs generally, and women entrepreneurs in particular, will not only help make the system fairer and more efficient, but also address some of the underlying political dynamics hindering the multilateral trading system.

Secondly, the abrupt halt of economic activity triggered by COVID-19 has to some extent led to a rethinking of global value chains. Governments and businesses alike are focused on improving their resilience in the face of further possible unsynchronized shocks. Many of the risks posed by the current global economic downturn, potential supply chain collapse and policy interventions designed to move production will inevitably fall on SMEs and, as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially on vulnerable groups such as women.

With this in mind, ICC's Save Our SMEs campaign called for governments to design interventions to focus on small businesses and the two billion workers they employ in the real economy. It also called on multinational companies to protect smaller businesses that are part of their value chains.

Thirdly, the economic shock induced by COVID-19 will also likely include a considerable trade finance shortfall once borders reopen and demand increases. ICC conservatively estimates that \$2 trillion to \$5 trillion in credit will be needed to support the recovery of imports and exports.

Given that SMEs, businesses in developing countries and women entrepreneurs tend to face greater obstacles when accessing trade finance, the private and public sectors must work together to address the trade finance gap and ensure greater access to capital for these groups.

The path to a resilient recovery from the current crisis will be not be simple. A key area of priority must be greater understanding of the challenges that SMEs and women entrepreneurs face, and the development of a suite of policies that provide them with appropriate support and enhanced access to global markets.

Only in doing so, will we be able to squarely address two of the fundamental fragilities that have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and that risk precipitating future global crises: economic exclusion and social inequality.

ICC is committed to playing a leading role in these efforts through our Save Our SMEs campaign (<https://www.sos.iccwbo.org>) – a rallying call that, given the uncertain economic outlook ahead of us, is likely to have long-term relevance.



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**Thoraya Obaid**

Chair, Women 20

## THOUGHT LEADER

# The W20 engagement group: Priorities in light of COVID-19

### What is the Women 20?

The Women 20 (W20) is an official G20 engagement group established during the Turkish presidency of the G20 in 2015. It is a policy recommendation engagement group that is part of the G20 process but is independent from governments. In its functioning, it mirrors the G20 process. The W20 is composed of a global network of men and women representing non-government women's organizations, civil society, female entrepreneurs and business leaders, and think tanks across G20 member states.

### Why does it matter?

The W20 brings the voice of women to the G20 process by ensuring that gender considerations are mainstreamed into discussions and translated into the G20 Leaders' Declaration as policies and commitments that foster gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

Through a year-long dialogue encompassing policy papers, official statements and global advocacy, and culminating in the final summit, W20 delegates jointly formulate concrete, actionable policy recommendations to advance gender equality in G20 negotiations. The W20 Communiqué reflects the engagement group's policy positions with supporting evidence. While these recommendations are non-binding, G20 leaders consider them in their talks and negotiations, contributing to the policymaking process.

If adopted by G20 member states, the policies developed by the W20 have the potential to change the lives of women and men at a local, national and international level.

### What has been the priority in 2020 and what has been done in light of COVID-19?

Under the 2020 presidency, the W20 has maintained its legacy policy priorities: digital inclusion, financial inclusion and labour inclusion. Recognizing that sustainable and systemic change in the aforementioned areas can only occur when women are represented at all levels of decision-making in both the public and private sector, we added inclusive decision-making to our list of policy priorities for 2020. Considering the COVID-19 crisis and the devastating effects it could have on women globally, all the W20 policy priorities come with greater urgency and importance.

W20 delegates formulated a statement to G20 leaders containing two sets of recommendations. The first highlights the key measures required to expedite global economic recovery following the pandemic. The second focuses on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Agenda and equitable growth by supporting women's social and economic empowerment.

A global crisis of this magnitude has the potential either to accelerate the gender equality agenda or to hamper past progress altogether and thus deepen the existing systemic inequalities. This crisis can be an opportunity to reset G20 economies by planning a recovery based on principles of inclusivity, acknowledging that the full and equitable participation of women across all sectors is critical to global recovery.

As such, the W20 2020 Communiqué will include specific recommendations that leaders can adopt to alleviate the damage caused by COVID-19, while simultaneously furthering gender equality.



## CHAPTER 4

# AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

As discussed in this policy brief, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light and induced major changes affecting global value chains and the policy environment. This chapter presents public and private stakeholders with an agenda for action to support women-led businesses, particularly micro to medium-sized enterprises, in response to the challenges and opportunities that have arisen in this new landscape.

Women, especially women entrepreneurs and small women-led companies, have a central role to play in the recovery effort. The paper has identified gender-specific challenges that may hinder their ability to contribute effectively.

Addressing broader issues and barriers including gender stereotypes, bias and norms is of utmost importance to ensure that women and men have access to equal opportunities. However, the following recommendations focus specifically on immediate actions with a view to promote value chains that are inclusive, sustainable and resilient. The action points are based on contributions by government representatives, experts and private sector companies.

It is our hope that this brief inspires corporations, policymakers and the international community to adopt this agenda and rise to the challenge of ensuring the full participation of women in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

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*'Too often, crises accentuate social injustice and exclusion. That means women of all races, nationalities and classes suffer. Our ability to bounce back from this current crisis is dependent on how we work to include everyone equally in our response – because when women thrive, we all thrive. We urge private and public institutions to think about what they can do to level the playing field for women, through their workforces, their markets and their contributions to society at large.'*

*Ajay Banga,  
President and  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Mastercard*

## Actions for corporations



### Action 1: Increasing women's participation in corporate supply chains

To help keep women-led SMEs in business in the aftermath of COVID-19 and leverage their potential in the economic recovery, private sector companies can promote supplier diversity and include women entrepreneurs and women-led businesses in their supply chains. To make sourcing more inclusive, lead firms can:

- ✓ Consider preferential schemes to support sustainable and inclusive suppliers, including women-led businesses.
- ✓ Provide incentives to suppliers to include more women in their supply chains.
- ✓ Ensure services reach women in supply chains.
- ✓ Partner with organizations that have databases of registered and certified women suppliers to help include them in supply chains.
- ✓ Ensure tender procedures are open and transparent.
- ✓ Provide clear and easily accessible guidelines (especially online) for selection criteria related to qualifications, request for quotation requirements and sourcing codes.
- ✓ Support access to information on the procurement process by providing constructive feedback.



### Action 2: Employing flexible supply chain financing options

Private sector actors can make financing options more flexible and accessible for women-led businesses in their supply chains. This is very important, because many small businesses have suffered significant losses during COVID-19 and face a liquidity crisis. To increase liquidity for women-led SMEs, lead firms can:

- ✓ Agree to competitive interest rates.
- ✓ Provide prompt payments to suppliers and further consider advance payments for future services.
- ✓ Create competitive finance schemes on future purchases based on attainment of certain inclusion or sustainability criteria.
- ✓ Encourage use of a supply chain financier to cover insurance and reduce financial risk to suppliers.
- ✓ Provide asset-based financing and bank guarantees for women-led enterprises.



### Action 3: Providing targeted training for women-led businesses

Corporations are uniquely placed to provide insights on the needs of buyers to help build the capacity of women-led businesses that are participating in or trying to integrate into their supply chains in the post-COVID-19 era. To assist women-led enterprises in this process, private sector companies can:

- ✓ Offer training or advice to support the rapid digitalization of businesses and reduce barriers for digital transformation.
- ✓ Create tailored training for women-led enterprises on topics such as logistics, quality control and standards that can make them more competitive.
- ✓ Share corporate toolkits to help companies, particularly SMEs, create crisis management and disaster preparedness plans for the future.
- ✓ Encourage women-led companies to join ITC SheTrades Initiative platform to access services such as training modules and online courses, information on tenders and connections with buyers.
- ✓ Deliver gender-responsiveness and diversity training to suppliers.





**Pamela Coke-Hamilton**

Executive Director,  
International Trade Centre

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Translating political commitments into action to support women

Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a global target to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, will require political commitment and leadership from both the public and the private sector. Moreover, this ambitious 2030 Agenda calls for more targeted assistance to support women's participation in and benefit from the economy.

This policy brief, along with the current body of research on gender inequalities, makes it devastatingly clear that political will is a good step but that translating gender equality commitments is even better – and more than that, is critical now more than ever.

Aligning with the International Trade Centre's (ITC) commitment to gender equality through the promotion of sustainable and inclusive trade, the SheTrades Initiative aims to connect three million women to markets by 2021.

SheTrades builds the capacity of women-led firms and producers to compete in international markets. The initiative works with governments, corporations and business support organizations to create the right conditions through policies, data, markets and partnerships. SheTrades also offers a digital platform ([shetrades.com](https://shetrades.com)) for women-led businesses to connect to buyers, investors and new markets.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus that without targeted trade-related support, many women-owned businesses will fail – we cannot afford to let this happen. Our work in West Africa has shown that COVID-19 especially affects poor farming communities, significantly disrupting global value chains. For example, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the shea sector are having trouble exporting due to a fall in demand, and the cashew sector in Côte d'Ivoire has suffered after border closures prevented major buyers from flying to West Africa to source raw cashews.

It is important to mitigate the negative effects on women working in such situations. In response, ITC SheTrades has digitalized content and coaching, increased collaboration with processors and exporters for direct support to small firms and farmers, provided training on intercropping and good agricultural practices, and organized awareness-raising sessions to ensure national regulations on COVID-19 are being observed.

ITC has also delivered and developed a broader range of COVID-19 response training and tools to support the efforts of women-owned businesses regarding resilience and recovery. For example, the SheTrades in the Commonwealth project developed a COVID-19 Crisis Management Toolkit. This toolkit includes a Resilience and Recovery Action Plan Canvas, a collection of relevant business planning and decision-making guides, and templates as well as references to online resources, webinars, trainings and ITC market intelligence tools.

SheTrades also joined forces with private sector partners, including UPS, Maersk, Visa and Working Capital Associates, to deliver a webinar series that helped women-led businesses navigate the crisis. The series provided expert guidance and analysis on topics including the impact of the pandemic on trade, how small enterprises can account for COVID-19 in financial planning, crisis management and how to address changes in consumer behaviour.

However, the provision of technical support is just one side of the coin. Small businesses are also in dire need of investment not only to weather the storm, but also to build back better.

That is why ITC, Care USA and Bamboo Capital Partners partnered to establish the CARE-SheTrades Impact Fund, which will deploy both debt and equity capital to growth-stage companies in South and Southeast Asia. Beyond cushioning the worst effects of the crisis, the CARE-SheTrades Impact Fund will support the private sector's ability to rebuild better by instilling new norms and practices around gender equality and worker protection.

In addition to capacity-building and competitiveness training, ITC SheTrades aims to improve policies for women in trade. In July 2020, ITC launched SheTrades Outlook, a new policy tool on trade and women's economic empowerment that helps policymakers assess, monitor and improve how their country's ecosystem supports women to trade. SheTrades Outlook includes new trade and gender data and provides 83 quantifiable and comparable indicators related to trade and gender across six areas: trade policy, business environment, legal and regulatory frameworks, access to skills, access to finance, and work and society.

The creation of SheTrades Outlook is especially timely because it can be used to ensure that the policy ecosystem can both safeguard women from the shocks of COVID-19 and make the environment more conducive for women to trade going forward.





**Penelope Naas**

President of International  
Government Affairs  
and Sustainability,  
UPS

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Women Exporters Programme: Our approach to empowering women in trade

**W**omen-owned businesses face barriers including discriminatory legislation, difficulty accessing capital and insufficient formal networks for expanding internationally. UPS and the UPS Foundation are proud to commit our resources and industry know-how to empower women to overcome these obstacles through the UPS Women Exporters Programme.

Leveraging our expertise in facilitating cross-border trade and e-commerce for small and medium-sized businesses, UPS and our partners provide the training and networks necessary to enable women entrepreneurs to engage in trade. We know that helping more women-led firms to export is key to unlocking more prosperity for communities around the globe.

The programme has trained more than 6,000 women entrepreneurs through 35 events in markets around the globe.

- In Mexico, 94% reported that the training activities improved their knowledge on access to international markets.
- In Nigeria, 88% reported that the training activities improved their packaging, labelling and marketing knowledge.
- In the United Arab Emirates, 88% reported that they increased the access of their business to global markets through e-commerce.
- In Vietnam, 78% reported that they increased their capacity and understanding on how to finance their business.

Every woman entrepreneur surveyed across all countries said she planned to attend similar events under the ITC SheTrades and UPS partnership in the future.

## Our approach

### Capacity building

UPS hosts workshops and webinars to connect women with export experts so they can better understand and navigate customs regulations, supply chain processes, trade agreements and export opportunities. Our partnership with ITC SheTrades supports the capacity-building efforts of the Women Exporters Programme through its online interactive training modules, including UPS's modules on Tariffs and Trade Regulations that Impact Exports, Freight Forwarders and Customs Brokers, Logistics for E-commerce, Warehousing and Logistics, and Incoterms.

### Market access

UPS helps women entrepreneurs identify market access opportunities with one-on-one consultations, leveraging the expertise of non-governmental organizations, business associations and governments.

### Regulatory framework

UPS leverages academic studies and policy discussions to advocate for policy frameworks and trade agreements that support women entrepreneurs and foster a regulatory environment that enables greater export growth of their businesses.

## Actions for policymakers



### Action 4: Supporting women's access to finance and financial services

Women-led businesses often have low reserves and find it difficult to access finance and financial services, especially in developing countries. The demand and supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 have exacerbated the cash flow and access to finance challenges faced by women-led firms.

Policymakers can consider the following actions to keep women-led businesses from closing their doors and to stimulate their growth:

- ✓ Create specific mechanisms to help women-led enterprises obtain finance (through public-private partnerships for concessionary finance for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, for example).
- ✓ Create incentives for financial institutions to create financing options that match the needs of women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (often loan sizes between \$20,000 and \$50,000, which tend to be outside mainstream financing offerings).
- ✓ Give women-led businesses special preferences under SME support programmes (for instance, loan repayment plans with lower interest rates or special financing for women-led businesses through lines of credit).
- ✓ Offer small women-led companies options to defer financial obligations for a short time period to prevent cash flow shortages (for instance, by providing the option to defer to banks, landlords or tax authorities for a few months).
- ✓ Provide assistance to women-led businesses with financial literacy and investment readiness (for start-up, development and growth).
- ✓ Support gender lens investing approaches to address systemic inequalities that women face.





### Action 5: Boosting women's participation in public procurement opportunities

Governments are in a unique position as both buyers and policymakers. Public procurement accounts for up to 15% of GDP in developed countries and 40% of GDP in least developed countries. Women-led businesses fulfil only a tiny fraction of public procurement needs globally.

Government spending has increased because of the pandemic. This presents an opportunity to create new sourcing approaches and networks and increase women's participation in public procurement by addressing gender-specific challenges. Policymakers can:

- ✓ Ensure tender information is clear and available online with sufficient time to prepare bids.
- ✓ Collect gender-disaggregated data on the award of public tenders to see how many are won by women and identify potential gaps in procurement practices.
- ✓ Use data collected on bidders to invite women-led businesses to apply for tenders.
- ✓ Provide training to women-led firms on tender requirements, qualifications and where to access information for tender opportunities.
- ✓ Set up help desks and provide feedback on applications to help bidders improve, simplify requirements for women bidders and increase transparency of procurement processes.
- ✓ Encourage accountability and promote gender awareness among procuring officers, especially to avoid late payments to women suppliers.
- ✓ Develop gender-responsive public procurement policies (including legally mandated preference schemes, for example) to increase the number and size of contracts awarded to women.

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*'The pandemic has had severe impacts on our global economies, and among the hardest hit are the many small and medium-sized enterprises that comprise trade in global supply chains, and that make up the bulk of jobs in many developing countries. We must urgently boost the supply and accessibility of trade finance, which will require coordinated action from business, government and multilateral agencies. Now is the time to come together to use every tool at our disposal to get supply chains running again, and return our economies to health.'*

*Victor Fung,  
Chairman,  
Li & Fung Group*



### Action 6: Promoting solutions for continuity of business

Policymakers can support women-led firms – including those that have been hit especially hard during the pandemic because of their sector of activity, smaller size or greater exposure to fixed costs and other vulnerabilities – with access to short-term solutions that help them maintain continuity of business and secure a foundation to build back better. Policymakers can:

- ✓ Offer a COVID-19 bailout package that includes allocations for SMEs and women-led businesses.
- ✓ Provide subsidized processing and packaging equipment as well as other critical inputs to help women suppliers.
- ✓ Help business support institutions create sustainable crisis management plans for companies through state-sponsored training.
- ✓ Create incentives or offer support to small companies in the hardest hit sectors so they avoid laying off women employees.
- ✓ Design and implement adjustment policies to help companies in sectors that could be fundamentally affected over the long term (programmes tailored to women-led firms could be envisaged).
- ✓ Support digitalization of women-led SMEs.
- ✓ Join or establish coordinated action to support micro, small and medium-size enterprises during the crisis and recovery (for instance, ICC's Save Our SMEs campaign).



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**Hon. Khumbudzo  
Ntshavheni**

Minister of Small  
Business Development,  
South Africa

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Integrating African youth and women in continental value chains

The lockdown of national borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the operations of global value chains as countries prioritized securing critical medical supplies and restricting the movement of critical imports to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. During this period, global value chains were dominated by those who could place, produce and move the largest orders at the quickest rate.

Inadvertently, the health responses of poorer countries and small and medium-sized businesses were undermined due to their inability to participate in what could be considered augmented global value chains. A high proportion of SMEs are youth- and women-led, and augmented global value chains therefore have the potential of limiting the participation of these groups.

The African Union, under the chairmanship of President Cyril Ramaphosa, established the Africa Medical Supplies Platform, which pools procurement for critical COVID-19 medical resources. The platform aims to improve access to critical medical resources for African countries that otherwise would not be available.

One of the objectives of the platform is the onboarding of African suppliers. This must be closely managed to ensure the participation of SMEs, particularly women- and youth-owned businesses. The platform opens continental value chains for businesses in ways that cannot be ignored.

The South African government – as a leading player in the establishment of the platform – is mindful of its obligations towards the integration of women and youth suppliers in value chains. We have already undertaken work to create a framework for their increased participation through the platform.

This framework will present these suppliers with an important opportunity to access a regional market of 1.1 billion people. In South Africa, a specific programme is already in place for the preferential procurement by the state of personal protective equipment from SMEs, including cooperatives, in particular for the production and purchase of cloth face masks.

The opportunities that will be opened through the platform are not limited to suppliers of medical products, but further include participation in related logistics and delivery.

The cross-border nature of fulfilment services calls for strong partnerships between women- and youth-owned enterprises across borders, and may also require partnering with established players in the logistics business.

We anticipate that the platform will expand beyond medical supplies to other commodities as the Africa Continental Free Trade Area comes into full effect and institutions replicate and build on best practices implemented during the pandemic. The commitment is always to ensure the participation of women- and youth-owned enterprises on a better footing so they can take full advantage of current and future opportunities. The platform prepares the ground for their increased participation in global value chains.





## Actions for the international community

### Action 7: Strengthening global cooperation

It is through global cooperation that a medical solution – available to all – to the COVID-19 virus and collective solutions, for socioeconomic recovery, will be found. Sustaining inclusive global value chains requires international cooperation in trade policy as well as a host of other policy areas, including taxes, investment, competition, infrastructure, data and intellectual property.

Add to this the health and environmental dimensions, and we have a strong call for greater global coordination – with women firmly placed at the core of this agenda. The international community can consider the following recommendations to strengthen global cooperation:

- ✓ Monitor the impacts of protectionist and other trade-related measures on supply chains and vulnerable communities, and adjust policy interventions and frameworks accordingly.
- ✓ Ensure that policies developed in response to the pandemic and to stimulate the recovery are fair, sustainable and inclusive, taking into account their impact on different communities and stakeholders along the value chain.
- ✓ Renew commitment to and involvement in international and regional fora to support women-led businesses (for example, through the G20, the W20, the WTO and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, among others).
- ✓ Promote environmentally friendly and sustainable joint recovery efforts to make sure that ‘build back better’ becomes more than a fleeting slogan.
- ✓ Leverage networks of women-led businesses to find potential synergies, facilitate trade among them and advocate together about their needs to policymakers.



### Action 8: Driving change for women through W20

The Women 20 aims to ‘contribute to laying a solid foundation for global economic recovery based on a strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth’. Empowering women and ensuring their businesses are supported and included in the path towards global recovery is smart economics.

As more women overcome financial barriers and launch their own ventures, they are changing the status quo. However, progress is still not deep or fast enough. G20 leaders should recognize women not simply as beneficiaries of social finance schemes, but as the drivers of a new sustainable investment ecosystem. As such, they must be at the core of economic recovery plans and global policymaking.

To protect women-led SMEs and women in the informal economy, and to ensure equitable recovery, the W20 calls on the G20 leaders to:

- ✓ Develop policy frameworks and action plans that increase women’s access to financial resources, remove institutional barriers to women’s entrepreneurship and boost capacity-building and vocational training for women.
- ✓ Provide incentivized support for the growth of women-led businesses and SMEs, particularly those in sectors where women are underrepresented.
- ✓ Encourage an investment environment that incorporates a gender lens in all levels of decision-making in national and global political and economic bodies.
- ✓ Set yearly goals and key performance indicators to track progress towards women’s increased participation in global markets, international trade and e-commerce.
- ✓ Invest in women’s access to and participation in technical and vocational education, e-skills and lifelong learning opportunities, including in e-commerce and science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

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*‘Mitigating the impact of the pandemic on women entrepreneurs is crucial for the long-term viability of business and the recovery from the economic crisis. More than that, 2020, marking 25 years from the Beijing Declaration, is our opportunity to reset and correct, making the right investments and equalizing opportunities and rights for gender equality.’*

*Vanessa Erogbogbo,  
Head,  
ITC SheTrades Initiative*



Senator the Hon.  
Marise Payne

Minister for Foreign Affairs  
and Minister for Women,  
Australia

## THOUGHT LEADER

# Our shared commitment to gender equality and cooperation is essential in COVID-19 response and recovery

COVID-19 is an unprecedented global pandemic with devastating impacts on health, society and the economy. It presents profound challenges and throws into sharp relief the differential, and significant, impacts on women and the vulnerable. Our responses depend on national actions and international cooperation.

The impacts we have seen in Australia are mirrored around the world. I have held discussions with counterparts regionally and around the globe, to share our experiences and solutions in response to COVID-19. These meetings highlight the common challenges we face.

Here in Australia, as Minister for Women, I have held dedicated meetings on the safety and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and women's job creation.

Key Australian institutions are monitoring the economic and social impacts. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency are reporting the data on the impacts of COVID-19 on employment and labour, domestic violence and households. National data collection and reporting adds to the emerging international evidence on the gendered impacts of COVID-19.

To minimize economic impacts and position the Australian economy to recover on the other side of the pandemic, the Australian Government is providing \$A314 billion (\$221 billion) in financial support for the economy – around 16% of GDP.

Under the Government's Domestic and Family Violence Support Package, we provided \$A130 million (\$91 million) to state and territory governments to invest in specialist services to protect women and children most at risk of violence during the pandemic, including for crisis accommodation, frontline services and perpetrator intervention programmes. We further invested \$A20 million (\$14 million) to boost capacity for Commonwealth-funded national programmes including 1800RESPECT, MensLine Australia, the Men's Referral Line and the Support for Trafficked People Program.

I have convened two Pacific Women Leaders meetings with the Samoan Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls and the vital role of women in the region's economic recovery.

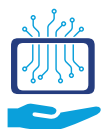
We have committed nationally and regionally to gender equality, prioritizing health, safety and economic outcomes. I have also co-chaired female foreign ministers discussions alongside Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya on women's role in economic recovery.

Australia's COVID-19 response and recovery package includes an additional \$A16 million (\$11 million) to address the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls in the Indo-Pacific. Australia's Investing in Women programme will help neighbouring countries respond to the economic impacts of the crisis on women. This includes funding to emergency relief and resilience that will support existing and new women's small and medium-sized enterprises in Southeast Asia.

Australia is committed to an open, liberal and inclusive rules-based multilateral trading system. Strong and transparent global trading rules are necessary to keep trade flowing, particularly for essential goods. Australia continues to work in the WTO, the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to build international consensus on maintaining and enhancing the contributions of the global trading system to economic recovery.

Australia is one of 127 signatories to the WTO Buenos Aires Declaration on Women's Economic Empowerment and, in 2020, joined those WTO members voluntarily reporting on trade and gender in its WTO Trade Policy Review. Australia champions gender issues and is contributing to the work of the Trade Impact Group in making a follow-up declaration for the 12<sup>th</sup> WTO Ministerial Conference.

We commend the WTO and ITC efforts such as the SheTrades initiative, and the G20's EMPOWER initiative. We also acknowledge Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development analysis, Canada's gender sensitivity work and Chile's experience integrating gender into free trade agreements. We value the work undertaken to improve the international evidence base and exchange practical tools available on these issues. This is a useful framework for us to affirm our shared value in cooperation, which we know will be essential to driving a global recovery after COVID-19.



### Action 9: Supporting digital literacy and use of digital technologies

To maintain competitiveness in the face of digital transformation, governments around the world were already racing to guarantee that their firms developed and used digital technologies through various national programmes. Greater reliance on these technologies due to COVID-19 means it has become even more pressing to support access to the internet and digital literacy skills for women-led companies.

A broad range of stakeholders have started to work on this through the EQUALS Global Partnership. EQUALS brings together more than 90 partners – corporate leaders, governments, businesses, non-for-profit and non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and community groups – to promote gender balance in the technology sector by boosting equality of access, skills development and career opportunities for girls and women.

Yet more can and must be done. Aligned with this objective, the international community can:

- ✓ Provide digital skills training specifically for women-led businesses, especially in rural areas.
- ✓ Support increased internet penetration in parts of the world where needed.
- ✓ Take steps to better understand women's barriers to accessing mobile ownership and digital financial services and design response strategies.
- ✓ Integrate women's economic empowerment and gender equality in digital strategies, plans and initiatives (for instance, by developing gender-sensitive policy approaches in the digital sphere covering issues such as privacy and safety).
- ✓ Encourage greater representation of women in leadership positions in science- and technology-related organizations and institutions.



## THOUGHT LEADER

# International response policies for a gender-inclusive recovery

Hon. Arancha González Laya

Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, Spain

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated how delicate the balance of our interconnected ecosystem is. It has exacerbated existing inequalities and created new challenges that will require global cooperation.

Our economy was already fragile. The 2008 financial crisis had weakened international financial and economic structures, and ongoing trade conflicts compounded by the 2020 health pandemic deepened this fragility. Rising income inequality has given way to citizen dissatisfaction as far too many individuals fear the economy does not work for them. And this, coupled with anxiety about the environment and climate change, has created a perfect storm.

COVID-19 has also laid bare existing gender inequalities. We know the pandemic affects women disproportionately, because they represent the majority of frontline workers, accounting for 70% of health and social-services staff globally. In addition, women tend to be in a less financially stable position than men, working in sectors that are seven times more likely to be shut down in the crisis.

Domestic violence against girls and women has skyrocketed during the lockdown period, showing the intersectionality between the economy and gender. The cross-cutting nature of gender means we cannot continue to treat it in isolation or address it in silos. This is why Spain has promoted a United Nations General Assembly Resolution on women, girls and COVID-19 that looks at all the dimensions that need to be addressed to ensure a gender-inclusive recovery.

Our approach to developing COVID-19 response policies that create positive and gender-equitable health and economic outcomes must be multidimensional. We must not choose between our health and economic recovery: they are two sides of the same coin and need to be pursued in tandem by enacting smart policies.

In the longer term, neither will be durable unless we address environmental sustainability. And for the global health, economic and environmental responses to be successful, they also must be coordinated, through multilateral cooperation.

In the fight against COVID-19, international cooperation has proven to be our best line of defence. In the early days of the pandemic, the scientific community shared vital information to help the world better understand the nature of the coronavirus and how to combat it. It was global scientific cooperation that has helped us save precious time and ultimately lives. Now, laboratories, hospitals and governments are working together in an unprecedented manner to accelerate the development of a vaccine or a treatment.

Multilateral cooperation cannot end here. Unilateral policies enacted initially in response to COVID-19 revealed the devastating effects that protectionist measures can have, particularly on vulnerable communities. We must just find that balance between strengthening the resilience of supply chains and ensuring our populations have access to medicine and food. We must do this while continuing to invest in international value chains that often provide jobs and income to millions of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises across the world, including in least developed countries.

As we strengthen our cooperation mechanisms, we need to ensure that we understand how our policies affect women and take concrete measures to create gender-just responses. These will include national policies in areas such as skills building, education and labour standards as well as putting gender equality at the forefront of the multilateral agenda – be this development, trade, health, jobs or the environment.

In our highly globalized and interconnected world economy, no country will be safe until all countries are safe. No woman will be ultimately safe until we all are.



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