TRADE AND INVESTMENT ADVOCACY FUND

Investigating the Role of Youth in Gender Equitable and Inclusive Trade

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AFCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Agreement
AU	African Union
AU-YVC	African Union Youth Volunteer Crops
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CUSBTA	Cambodia-US Bilateral Textile Agreement
EAC	East African Community
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GVC	Global Value Chain
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IoT	Internet of Things
LDCs	Least developed countries
MSMEs	Medium-scale enterprises
RTA	Regional Trade Agreements
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Fields
TAF2+	Trade and Investment Advocacy Fund
TFP	Total factor productivity
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference and Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
VSS	Voluntary Sustainability Standards
WBES	World Bank Enterprise Surveys
WTO	World Trade Organisation
YBI	Youth Business International
YCSB	Youth Sustainability Council of Brazil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young women and men play critical roles in trade, as entrepreneurs, skilled workers, cross-border traders, and consumers, yet face structural and capacity barriers to participating in trade. This paper investigates the participation of young women and men in trade with a focus on their entrepreneurial and employee roles. It considers the challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which youth are more likely to own or run. In the absence of age-disaggregated data, the authors use the World Bank Enterprise Surveys to assess the characteristics and the barriers faced by SMEs engaged in global value chains. This is complemented by literature and qualitative evidence that can be applied to the experience of youth. The paper then investigates the situation of youth in employment by considering the gap in skilled labour faced by trading firms that can be addressed by youth, with a particular focus on digital skills. A gender mainstreaming approach is applied throughout to assess the differences in the experiences of young women and men. The analysis then considers successful policy, private sector, and partner interventions to address these gaps and highlights the newer trend of integrating youth considerations in trade agreements. Findings suggest that the primary challenge faced by youth-owned or -led smaller trading firms is access to finance and that greater integration in global value chains allows SMEs to overcome barriers related to factors of production. Trading firms may provide more stable and skilled employment for young women and increased opportunities for youth if successful policies and programmes to address a labour-skills mismatch are scaled. Youth participation in leadership and decision-making can address sustainability and impact gaps through a holistic approach involving capacity building and mentorship. Existing experience and evidence show initial successes and provide insight into approaches stakeholders can take at the level of trade agreements, policy, and implementation to ensure young women and men fully benefit from trade and trade outcomes are enhanced as a result. The paper ultimately argues that policies and programmes to encourage and ensure the full participation of youth in trade in all their roles can address market gaps and enhance trade.

BACKGROUND

Increased trade can create opportunities and benefits for youth by providing economic opportunities through access to wider markets and skills, addressing the growing challenge of youth unemployment. While youth can benefit from increased trade, it is clear that the success of trade also depends on youth participation. Youth play various roles in trade – as entrepreneurs of start-ups, employees in export-oriented companies, as small-scale cross-border traders – and dominate certain industries such as creatives and technology. The youth bulge in low- and middle-income countries means that youth can be critical drivers of growth, constituting a large part – in some cases a majority – of the labour force. Thus, youth play a critical role in growing trade, whether by innovating and addressing market gaps as entrepreneurs, providing an important source of labour for export-oriented industries, or supporting food security through their important role in cross-border trade.

However, youth face structural and capacity barriers to participating in trade. Youth entrepreneurs often face challenges of start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), chief among them access to finance and markets. Youth seeking employment in trade-related industries may be concentrated at lower levels of value chains and in low-skilled labour and face a labour-skills mismatch; they are often not trained for the jobs in the market or the jobs of the future, with automation replacing manual, low-skilled jobs. Young small-scale traders may be disproportionately exposed to non-tariff barriers such as safety and security issues at border crossings, with young women often facing harassment by border officials and young men trading often across conflict borders. Youth across the board are limited by a lack of social capital and are often not well organised as an economic bloc, which limits their access to networks including business linkages and investors, their bargaining power as employees, and their ability to influence policy or engage in leadership roles.

Rationale & Objectives

Given the potential of young women and men to contribute to and benefit from increased trade, a concerted effort must be placed on ensuring their participation. Current trade agreements are notably lacking in provisions specific to youth, though youth can leverage several provisions. This however is contingent on the implementation of these trade agreements – at the level of national policy. Gaps in evidence exist in terms of understanding the effectiveness of these policies. This paper therefore considers best practices in trade provisions encouraging youth participation and lessons learned from policies that address barriers to and support youth participation in trade.

This study investigates the role youth play in trade. It presents evidence on the role young women and men currently play in trade and provides recommendations to policymakers on how to enhance that role for the benefit of trade and economic development in low- and middle-income countries. In doing so, the study addresses the following questions:

- What roles do young women and men currently play in trade?
- What are the barriers to youth engagement in trade, including on key issues such as entrepreneurship, employment, small-scale trade, sectors and value chains, leadership and policymaking, and social capital? Are they age-specific?
    - How are these different for young women and young men?
- What policies and interventions have been successful in enhancing the participation of youth in trade?
- What opportunities exist to enhance the role of young women and men in trade?
- How can young women and men be better integrated into trade policymaking?

Structure & Methodology

The paper first defines the scope of youth in trade to be considered and the roles young women and men play in trade, with a focus on entrepreneurs and employees. It considers the barriers faced in each role and key sectors and discusses whether those barriers are in fact age specific and how gender interacts with age. While many barriers may not be age-specific (such as those affecting all small businesses), the solutions can be. The analysis therefore discusses lessons learned from interventions addressing the identified barriers, from policy to private sector to ecosystem or aid for trade. The paper considers successes that can be scaled, reasons for lack of success, and remaining gaps, particularly regarding representation of youth in leadership and decision-making. The subsequent section considers global practice on the emerging area of integrating youth considerations in trade agreements. Case studies have been included throughout, to add depth and context to the findings.

The methodology of this study relies on desk research, including theoretical frameworks, previous research on the topic, and evidence reviews of trade agreements, policies, and programmes. Quantitative data analysis was also conducted to provide insights into the participation of young women and men in trade. The assessment utilizes firm-level pooled data obtained from the World Bank Enterprise Surveys (WBES), which serves as a valuable resource for obtaining comprehensive insights into the business environment, encompassing crucial aspects such as access to finance, trade, innovation, workforce dynamics, corruption, competition, and infrastructure. This study draws upon data from a substantial sample of 143,598 firms located across 154 countries, with a specific focus on developing economies and emerging markets. The surveys conducted span a range of years, from 2006 to 2022, and predominantly concentrate on the manufacturing and services sectors. The surveys encompass diverse industries and firms of varying sizes, ensuring that the data collected is representative at the country level.

Using these surveys, the authors follow the four definitions of a Global Value Chain (GVC) elaborated by Dovis and Zaki (2020) using four dimensions: export status, import status, international certification and type of ownership. The first definition is the most lenient as it encloses firms that are exporters and importers at the same time. The second and third definitions encompass firms that are simultaneously exporters and importers and that also have either international certification or a foreign ownership of its capital. The fourth definition is the strictest as it combines the four dimensions together. Firm’s size in this study is defined following the WBES classification of firms based on the number of employees. Hence, a firm is considered small if the number of employees is below 20, medium if the number is between 20 and 99, and large if the number of employees is greater than or equal 100.

Gender dimensions are mainstreamed throughout the paper by considering the ways in which young women and young men differently experience and participate in trade and in the policies and provisions discussed, given available data where possible or using plausible inferences where appropriate. In considering intersectionality, due to the lack of available data disaggregated by both gender and age, the paper leverages existing literature on women in trade where possible, in combination with the findings related to youth, to understand the possible implications for young women. The analysis triangulates with other studies where available.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this paper’s analysis is a universally agreed upon definition of the concept of “youth in trade”. The authors propose a definition based on international conventions, but global and regional precedent for defining an age bracket for youth in trade specifically does not exist. This limits the comparability of secondary data findings and analysis between different sources. The paper’s analysis is also limited by the availability of age-disaggregated firm-level data. Instead, an analysis of SMEs compared to large businesses is used to approximate the age-based impacts, based on the assumption that youth are more likely to own or run SMEs compared to larger trading companies. In addition, the ability of the authors to conduct primary data collection was limited by the short time frame available for the research. Instead, the analysis relies on secondary data, including qualitative evidence on good practices relating to youth in trade. Therefore, the descriptive analysis outlined should be taken as indicative rather than conclusive.

FINDINGS

Defining Youth in Trade

There is no universally agreed upon definition of "youth in trade". Indeed, there has been no attempt made to define the term or apply an age range in any trade agreement thus far. Global and regional frameworks related to youth often speak to youth in their social roles, primarily as children, calling into question the applicability of the concepts and age range used to the idea of "youth in trade". For example, the UN Habitat Youth Fund defines youth as between 15 and 32; the UN Secretariat/UNESCO/ILO consider youth to range from 15-24 years of age; and other UN instruments and the African Youth Charter consider youth as 15-35 years of age. This indicates that the definition of youth changes with circumstances, especially in different demographic, financial, economic, and socio-cultural settings.

First, in examining age-related definitions, the closest consideration of youth in an economic role relates largely to child labour regulations. In considering youth in the world of work, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Minimum Age Convention of 1973 helpfully determines a lower bound: 16 years as the minimum working age, or 18 for dangerous work. It recognises the differences in approach by various governments and regions and treats the lower bound as a threshold above which countries can set their own lower bound according to national laws. It does not comment on the upper bound of the age range. This approach can be applied in the case of youth in trade. The authors therefore propose to consider an age range of youth in trade that allows for flexibility based on context, beginning at 16 years of age or higher in the case of national laws, with the maximum age determined by national or regional context.

In assessing the concepts behind youth in trade, the literature on women in trade can also provide guidance. Thus, the authors propose that "youth in trade" refers to young people in their various economic roles as entrepreneurs or business owners, producers, traders, workers, investors, decision-makers, researchers and consumers of trade-related products and services among others.[1] This definition acknowledges the need for institutionalized initiatives and targeted policies that reflect the peculiar needs of the youth in their various roles in trade and economic development.

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[1] The definition of youth in trade has been adapted and modified from joint World Bank and WTO's (2020) definition of women in trade.

Roles Young Women and Men Play in Trade

YOUTH AS ENTREPRENEURS: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Although entrepreneurship remains a crucial engine of job creation for the economic empowerment of women and youth, most women- and youth-owned firms fall within the categories of micro, small, or medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) for goods and services. In fact, according to Schott et al. (2015) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Trade Organization Aid for Trade report (2019), young people under the age of 35 years are 1.6 times more likely to start a business than people above 35 (OECD & World Trade Organization, 2019). Considering the high rates of youth entrepreneurship, it is not surprising that about 44% of the world's entrepreneurs are between the ages of 18 to 35 years.

The central motivation behind pursuing youth economic empowerment through trade lies in recognizing the crucial role played by youth entrepreneurs and SMEs as the cornerstone of economies. These youth-owned SMEs have significant potential to generate employment opportunities for young people, especially in developing countries. As highlighted by the International Trade Center (ITC, 2015a), SMEs in developing countries tend to hire individuals from poorer and more vulnerable segments of society.

In the same vein, many countries recognize the role that SMEs play in providing valuable work experience, skill development, and income generation for youth, which contributes to their economic empowerment and social inclusion (OECD & World Trade Organization, 2019). For instance, Samoa acknowledges that SMEs constitute the largest share of its economy and emphasizes the need for interventions aimed at supporting economic diversification and empowering these enterprises. Kazakhstan and Maldives highlight the significant contribution of SMEs as major sources of employment. Senegal emphasizes that the substantial share of employment attributed to SMEs, accounting for 99.8% of the economy, should guide the level of importance given to their economic empowerment. Guinea considers the empowerment of SMEs as the foundation for development, particularly for least developed countries. Likewise, the Caribbean Development Bank report (CDB, 2016) shows that SMEs represent around 70-85% of firms in the Caribbean and accounting for 50% of employment and 60-70% of GDP.

Regarding the nexus between SMEs and participation of youth in trade, CDB (2016) describes SMEs as the missing links for inclusive growth as they play a crucial role in integrating youth into many exporting sectors and value chains by hiring them. The 2019 OECD & WTO Aid for Trade report argues that youth skills help firms go global with their research demonstrating a positive and significant relationship between the human capital level in SMEs and the tendency of the firm to internationalise. The empirical evidence also shows that the higher the level of human capital equipped with skills, technical training and digital literacy, the more the exports are diversified (Cadot et al., 2011). Similarly, Schott et al. (2015) demonstrate that young entrepreneurs are on average more likely to internationalise compared to firms led by older entrepreneurs for two main reasons. First, the higher the skill level, the better the firms can adapt their goods and technologies to the national economic environment, promoting economic diversification and facilitating exports to neighboring countries. Second, education and training of workers in developing countries can help companies upgrade their position in global value chains and meet the quality standards of foreign clients (Jansen and Lanz, 2013). Additionally, internationalization often necessitates soft skills such as presentation, communication, and language proficiency (CEDEFOP, 2010). This may explain the positive association that exists between the level of human capital, youth skills and firms' tendency to go international and to diversify their exports.

Using the World Bank Enterprise Surveys (WBES) to compare firm size to engagement in trade, Figure 1 supports the literature as it shows that almost 64% of firms engaging in international trade are SMEs, confirming the crucial role that youth play in international trade. Therefore, empowering and supporting SMEs helps countries foster economic development, enhance participation in international trade, and create opportunities for inclusive growth.

In terms of young women's representation in SMEs, Figure 2 shows that only 36.1% and 14.5% of SMEs engaging in trade have a woman[2] owner or manager, respectively. In light of these rates, it is evident that despite endeavors to increase women's inclusion in the economy, a significant gender disparity in entrepreneurial activity remains. As engaging in international markets and international trade is a sign of the firm's competitiveness and ability to meet the quality standards of foreign countries, the lower likelihood of women engaging in international trade raises concerns about the sustainability of women-owned firms and their ability to remain competitive, further exacerbating the gender gap over time.

Figure 1. Size of Firms Engaging in Trade

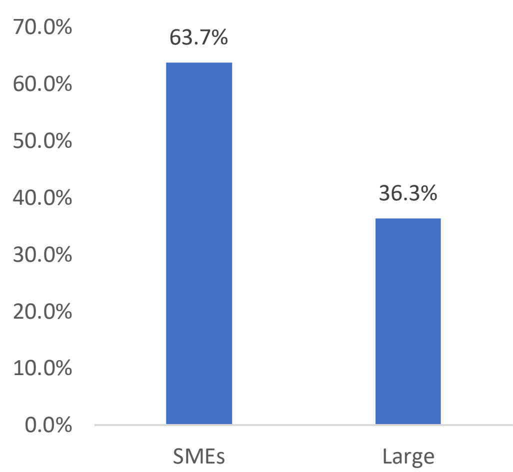
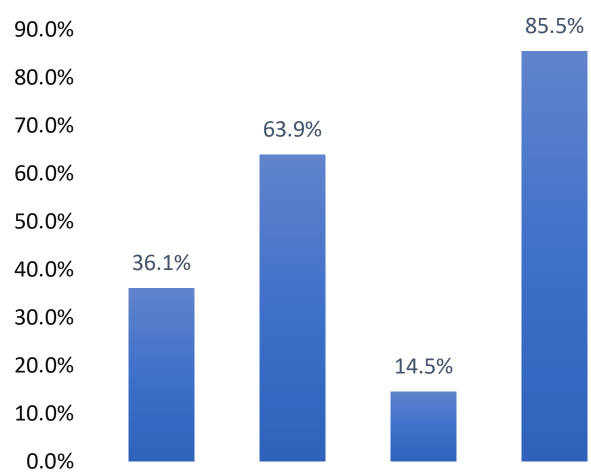


Figure 2. SMEs Engaging in Trade, Gender Lens



Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Note: The firm is considered an SME if the number of employees is less than or equal 99 and large if the number of employees is greater than or equal to 100.

[2] While the WBES uses the terminology of "female" when referring to ownership, management, and employment, for consistency, the authors use the terminology of "woman" and "women" in keeping with the definition of gender.

In terms of sectoral distribution of firms, using the WBES, the majority of firms (62.4%) involved in global value chains (GVCs)[3] are SMEs. In addition, among these SMEs integrating into GVCs, approximately 23% predominantly operate within the services sector. This aligns with data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, indicating that youth-led firms tend to export more in the services sector and are less likely to export in the manufacturing and primary sectors compared to other firms.

Although youth theoretically stand to benefit from trade, and trade can gain from increased youth participation, it is important to note that these positive outcomes do not automatically occur. Various youth-specific barriers exist that constrain the participation of young people in trade and limit the associated benefits. Evidence suggests that many youth-led businesses do not survive due to obstacles such as tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. The WTO reports that SMEs are more susceptible to the negative effects of high tariffs than larger firms (World Trade Organization, 2016). This is due to the fact that higher tariffs in destination markets comprise a higher per unit cost for small and medium-scale traders, making it extremely difficult for SMEs to export. Further, research suggests that SMEs are more sensitive to tariffs because they primarily produce price-sensitive goods (World Trade Organization, 2016).

Apart from tariffs, youth and women-owned firms are also disproportionately impacted by non-tariff measures such as product standards and regulatory measures (International Trade Centre, 2015). Since these measures often represent fixed trading costs, the burden tends to be greater for small and medium-scale firms which are mostly owned by women and young people than it is for larger firms and companies. For example, in a joint World Bank-WTO case study of 33 countries, the evidence demonstrates that women-led businesses are subjected to trade costs that are 13% higher compared with firms led by men (Korinek et al., 2021). Similarly, a World Bank study of market access barriers faced by households in India revealed that goods produced by those on the lower income deciles which were mostly owned by women and young people faced over 200 different types of non-tariff measures whereas those owned and operated by the top income deciles who were mainly men faced only 127 non-tariff measures (Mendoza et al., 2018). The study highlighted that there were higher incidences of non-tariff measures on women traders who most often were overrepresented at the bottom of the income distribution (Mendoza et al., 2018).

Further, in a Pakistani survey covering around 1200 companies conducted by the International Trade Center (ITC), it was revealed that a glaring 66% of women-owned companies reported difficulties with non-tariff measures compared with 34% of men-owned companies. The difficulties reported by the women-owned companies were mainly attributed to the completion of complex and costly customs and border processes such as the completion of certification on rules of origin, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS), tax rebates on exported products, and export restrictions among others (ITC, 2020).

Research suggests costs of non-tariff barriers are often higher than tariff costs, leading to the prevalence of informal cross-border trade, defined as undeclared trade through gazetted and non-gazetted border crossings (ECA, AU,

[3] Author's own calculations using the WBES and Dovis and Zaki's classification of GVC (2020).

Afreximbank, 2023). Small-scale cross-border trade has been defined as legitimate trade carried across borders by commercial players such as individuals and firms (Brenton et al., 2013). Characterized by low levels of capitalization and individually owned, women and youth dominate cross-border trade, particularly in Africa and Asia where such trade activities are prevalent. According to the International Organisation of Migration (2021), enterprises engaged in cross-border trade are mainly made up of MSMEs, carts and brick-and-mortar shops. Cross-border traders across various regions deal in low-volume, low-value food, household items, and essential goods among others for sale in local markets within border zones. Its activities thus encompass myriad small traders, transporters, middlepersons, artisans, and individuals involved in the supply chain (EAP Gender, 2016). The World Bank, in a survey on cross-border trading in the Great Lakes region of Africa, revealed that 85% of such traders were young women with an average age of 32 years (Brenton et al., n.d.).

Small-scale cross-border traders play an important role in closing local economic gaps through the supply of essential goods and services, including contributing to food security. They also help stabilize economies, particularly smaller economies by generating demand across borders. Moreover, cross-border trading serves as an important livelihood strategy for poverty reduction while supporting the socio-economic empowerment of women and young people. According to a report by both UNCTAD and OECD, whether formal or informal, the barriers and obstacles to small-scale cross-border trading activities remain very common. Key among such challenges at border crossing points are sexual harassment of women and young people, bribery, corruption, and extortion from border officials, cumbersome border processes, and unevenly applied taxes and rules (OECD, 2020; UNCTAD 2020). Informal trade is further characterised by additional risks of lack of protection.

Based on an empirical analysis of the WBES, Table 1 reports the main obstacles affecting firms' operation based on their size. The authors find that 14.70% of firms report access to finance as the main obstacle affecting their operation, with SMEs comprising nearly 86% of these firms. These findings are consistent with data from ITC's firm-level survey, which reveals that 76% of firms reporting access to finance as the main obstacle to their operation are youth-led business compared to 59% of non-youth led companies (OECD/WTO, 2019). SMEs face greater financial constraints relative to large firms due to their limited tangible capital and assets that can serve as collateral, which hampers their access to finance (Schiffer and Weder, 2001; Beck and Maksimovic, 2002; Bigsten and Soderbom, 2006; Aterido et al., 2011). Furthermore, Schott et al. (2015) propose that social, cultural, and regulatory biases against lending to youth, specifically to young women, contribute to the limited access to finance. On average, 51% of funding for youth-led start-ups comes from personal savings, 22% from family savings, 19% from banks or other financial institutions, 3% from friends, and 5% from alternative sources. As businesses grow and mature, additional funding sources become indispensable, yet they may not always be readily available (ITC, 2019b).

In addition to financial constraints, a significant proportion of SMEs face challenges related factors of production, including electricity (11.68%). Greenstone (2014) emphasizes the transformative benefits of reliable energy access, including income generation, economic diversification, increased productivity through the substitution of labour with capital, the establishment of small businesses and enterprises, the reallocation of household time – particularly for women – towards improved education, and access to larger markets due to reduced transportation and communication costs.

These findings align with the arguments put forth by Geroski (1998) and Castany et al. (2005), who argue that a firm's size indirectly affects its total factor productivity (TFP). A firm's size influences its research and development (R&D) initiatives, innovative activities, and the qualifications of its employees (human capital), subsequently enhancing the firm's TFP. Therefore, the scarcity of skilled workers acts as a barrier for SMEs, impeding their growth and expansion. Limitations on an adequately educated workforce (8.44%) restricts their ability to innovate, adopt new technologies, and keep up with evolving market trends. As a result, SMEs may struggle to meet the cost, quantity, and time requirements necessary for competitiveness, thereby inhibiting their participation in international trade (Bacchetta et al., 2017).

Table 1. The Biggest Obstacle Affecting the Firms' Operation, by Size (%)

	Size			SMEs
Biggest Obstacle Affecting the Operation of This Establishment	Large	SMEs	Total	
Access to Finance	1.98	12.72	14.70	15.45
Tax Rates	2.16	10.82	12.98	13.13
Practices of Competitors in The Informal Sector	1.75	9.79	11.54	11.85
Electricity	1.76	9.64	11.40	11.68
Political Instability	2.09	8.68	10.77	10.51
Inadequately Educated Workforce	2.10	6.97	9.07	8.44
Corruption	1.15	5.38	6.54	6.56
Labor Regulations	0.97	2.82	3.79	3.42
Crime, Theft and Disorder	0.60	2.83	3.43	3.42
Tax Administration	0.64	2.71	3.35	3.30
Customs and Trade Regulations	0.68	2.20	2.88	2.68
Transport	0.63	2.63	3.25	3.20
Access to Land	0.35	2.41	2.76	2.93
Business Licensing and Permits	0.51	2.11	2.62	2.56
Courts	0.20	0.72	0.92	0.88
Total	17.57	82.43	100.00	100.00

Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Notes: The firm is considered SME if the number of employees is less than or equal 99 and large if the number of employees is greater than or equal 100; Only one obstacle is selected per respondent; Obstacle's choice is based on the firm's own perception.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE GENDER DIMENSION

Distinguishing by the gender of the owner, Table 2 reveals that both types of firms report access to finance as the main obstacle affecting their operation, irrespective of the gender of the enterprise owner. However, a higher proportion of women-owned businesses report taxes, informal sector competitors, and an inadequately educated workforce as barriers compared to men-owned firms, who tend to report challenges with electricity, political instability, and corruption more often than women-owned firms. This indicates that tariff barriers may affect the ability of women entrepreneurs to enter new markets, suggesting trade liberalisation may prove helpful for women. It also affirms the prevalence of the economic activities of women in sectors that lend themselves to informality, suggesting incentivising formalisation through the removal of non-tariff barriers may improve the environment for women entrepreneurs. Finally, challenges associated with skills gaps can be addressed by policies and programmes ensuring youth receiving appropriate skills training and entering the labour force.

Table 2. The Biggest Obstacles Affecting SMEs' Operation from a Gender Lens (%)

	Type of Ownership	
Obstacle	Men-Owned	Women-Owned
Access to Finance***	14.50	14.41
Tax Rates***	12.86	14.10
Electricity***	12.46	9.08
Political Instability***	11.10	10.03
Practices of Competitors in The Informal Sector***	10.84	12.96
Inadequately Educated Workforce***	8.70	10.13
Corruption***	6.92	5.70
Labor Regulations***	3.66	4.34
Tax Administration	3.29	3.33
Crime, Theft and Disorder*	3.26	3.42
Transport	3.11	3.65
Customs and Trade Regulations***	2.90	2.73
Access to Land***	2.87	2.47
Business Licensing and Permits***	2.65	2.66
Courts	0.90	0.99
Total	**100.00**	**100.00**

Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Notes: Only one obstacle is selected per respondent; Obstacle's choice is based on the firm's own perception.
*** the difference significance test is significant at 0.01, ** at 0.05 and, * at 0.1.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Policies and programmes addressing youth entrepreneurship may help address structural barriers and inequalities limiting youth participation in trade and may support youth to grow their businesses through trade. Many of these policies exhibit a key feature – they are the result of successful public-private partnerships.

Youth policies and programmes worldwide have demonstrated positive outcomes. For example, Aquaculture Enterprise Development and Cassava value chain projects in Zambia had the explicit aim of empowering youth and MSMEs (OECD, 2019). Inspired by the potential for increases in intra-African trade of fish and other aquatic food products, the aquaculture project, led by WorldFish and funded through Norad in partnership with Musika, has played a pivotal role in stimulating private-sector investments in smallholder aquaculture and its value chains. The primary objective of this project was to facilitate the establishment of sustainable employment opportunities for young people residing in rural areas of Zambia by fostering the growth of SMEs. Currently, the sector employs approximately 13,000 individuals. This expansion offers a substantial economic potential for youth, generating jobs across a spectrum of activities, including fish farming, processing, and transportation. One effective strategy to reduce the barriers to entry for young people that emerged from the project was the promotion of business models that actively include youth (WorldFish, 2021). A youth farmer who benefited from the project explained that the new private sector market linkages to quality fish seed and fish feed producers made it easier to expand his farming business. In his current production cycle, he managed to generate revenue more than double the initial investment.

In addition, the training and network that he was exposed to has allowed him to enter new markets by diversifying his products to include other species, particularly catfish.

Programmes aimed at connecting youth across borders can facilitate business linkages to support trade and can encourage youth to exchange skills and employment in other markets. Through Aid for Trade initiatives, development partners can enable these opportunities across borders through collaboration with public and private sectors. An example of this is the YouthConnekt Africa Hub, an initiative aimed at empowering and connecting youth across the African continent, that provides youth entrepreneurs with opportunities for economic growth, social innovation, and development. Launched in Rwanda in 2012 as a joint initiative between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Rwandan government, the programme aims to address the challenges faced by the growing youth population in Africa. These challenges include unemployment, limited access to education, and economic opportunities. The programme also utilizes regional platforms, which serve as hubs for youth empowerment, innovation, and entrepreneurship across the continent with 25 national chapters (YouthConnekt Africa Report, 2021).

These programmes have demonstrated substantial and tangible impacts for youth. For example, a graduate of YouthConnekt, Nadine, the Kanyana World Fashionist, had the opportunity to be part of the first cohort of the Art-Rwanda-Ubuhanzi in 2018. The incubation programme equipped her and 67 other artists with entrepreneurial and business skills to advance their talents, turning them into income-generating projects. The programme also provided a co-working space, professional coaching, and access to equipment to enable them to produce quality art pieces to be sold in a showroom. Participating in the programme has led to a growth in orders from one per week to six per day, increasing her sales more than 5 times and creating 6 jobs (10 YouthConnekt Success Stories).

Based on their experience of the initiative, the Hub notes that to expand similar initiatives, there is a need to engage governments, build partnerships, involve youth, and tailor programmes to the unique needs and challenges of each country (YouthConnekt Africa Report, 2021). Such policies and programmes help unlock the potential of Africa's young population and play a significant role in the continent's development and future prosperity.

YOUTH AS EMPLOYEES

Examining the challenges discussed in the preceding section from the perspective of firms involved in GVCs, encouragingly, Table 3 below presents positive findings, indicating that as firms progress from the least stringent definition of GVC (GVC1) to the most stringent (GVC4), the proportion of firms reporting specific operational problems decreases. This suggests that the greater a firm's integration into GVCs – representing greater participation in trade – the more likely it is able to overcome obstacles and challenges. The analysis highlights that access to finance remains a major obstacle affecting their operation, though integration in GVCs seems to help mitigate against this. This is also true for tax rates, where a higher degree of integration into GVCs reduces tax barriers faced. Competitors in the informal sector remain consistent barriers, indicating that incentives for formalisation may be a conducive strategy.

Interestingly, unlike most other barriers, an educated workforce becomes increasingly critical as a firm becomes more integrated into GVCs, representing the mostly commonly cited obstacle, indicating that appropriately skilled youth can address barriers faced by trading firms and contribute to their stability. This is supported by a similar trend associated with labour regulations. Similarly, the OECD/WTO Aid for Trade report (2019) reveals that employers worldwide, in both developed and developing countries, face challenges in finding skilled workers. Approximately 40% of businesses in Europe encounter such difficulties, while the figures are approximately 30% in Peru and Colombia. Similar or even higher percentages are observed in other developing nations, such as Panama (40%), Mexico (40%), India (60%), and Brazil (70%), as reported by the World Economic Forum (2014). This skills mismatch between the education system and labor market requirements leads to economic inefficiencies and significant costs, particularly in terms of youth unemployment. SMEs that are unable to find skilled employees may hire fewer workers, including young individuals, while companies that succeed in attracting skilled job seekers are more likely to employ them. Consequently, it becomes crucial to prioritize efforts and initiatives that address these issues in order to improve firms' operations and facilitate their participation in GVCs.

Table 3. The Biggest Obstacles Affecting the Firms' Operation and GVC Participation (%)

	GVC1		GVC2		GVC3		GVC4	
Obstacle	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Access to Finance	15.30	12.3	15.08	10.58	14.98	8.17	14.87	7.17
Tax Rates	13.21	12.1	13.05	12.22	13.12	9.86	13.04	9.87
Electricity	12.11	8.5	11.71	8.11	11.49	9.38	11.46	8.97
Competitors in The Informal Sector	12.00	9.7	11.84	8.34	11.67	8.65	11.60	8.97
Political Instability	10.73	10.9	10.74	11.05	10.78	10.58	10.78	10.31
Inadequately Educated Workforce	7.76	14.4	8.37	16.57	8.81	15.14	8.91	16.14
Corruption	6.72	5.8	6.61	5.76	6.56	6.01	6.56	5.83
Crime, Theft and Disorder	3.61	2.6	3.53	2.23	3.42	3.61	3.43	3.14
Tax Administration	3.30	3.5	3.31	3.76	3.32	4.09	3.32	4.48
Labor Regulations	3.28	5.9	3.51	6.93	3.66	6.73	3.70	8.07
Transport	2.97	3.6	3.21	3.76	3.18	4.81	3.22	4.48
Access to Land	2.97	1.9	2.86	1.76	2.80	2.16	2.78	1.79
Business Licensing and Permits	2.60	2.7	2.59	2.94	2.61	2.88	2.61	3.14
Customs and Trade Regulations	2.40	4.8	2.69	4.94	2.71	6.73	2.80	6.28
Courts	0.86	1.2	0.89	1.29	0.91	1.44	0.91	1.35
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.

Note: GVC1 refers to firms that export and import simultaneously, GVC2 = GVC1 + international certification, GVC3= GVC1+ share of its capital owned by a foreign firm, GVC4 combines the four criteria altogether (Dovis and Zaki, 2020); Only one obstacle is selected per respondent; Obstacle's choice is based on the firm's own perception.

REPRESENTATION IN SPECIFIC SECTORS AND ALONG VALUE CHAINS: AGE- AND GENDER-SPECIFIC BARRIERS?

From a gender perspective, Table 3 reveals that sectors such as services, food, and textile/garments exhibit a higher concentration of women. This holds true for both women's ownership and top management positions. These findings align with the research conducted by Frederick et al. (2022), which highlights that women's employment is highest in the apparel manufacturing sector. Their study indicates that textiles and leather industries are significant employers of women in developing countries with the percentage of women's employment in these sectors ranging from 2% in Egypt to 16% in Cambodia.

Examining the average female workforce size, Figure 3 below demonstrates that firms involved in GVCs generally exhibit a higher average number of full-time permanent women production workers. Additionally, when comparing the average number of women in full-time permanent to seasonal/temporary production works, GVCs seem to provide more stable and secure employment opportunities.

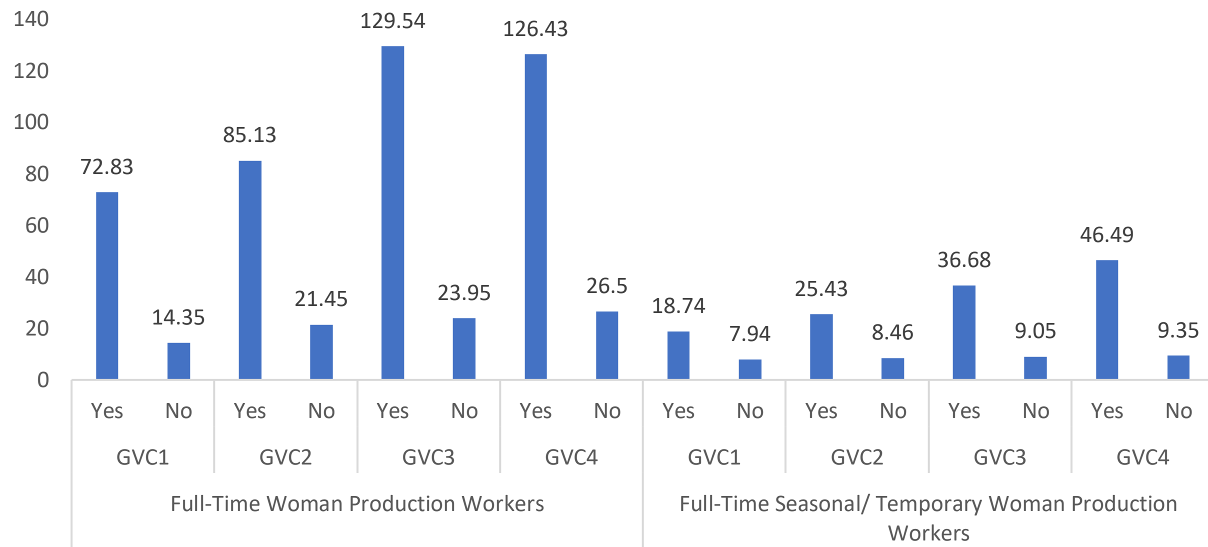
Despite the absence of specific data in Table 4 and Figure 3 below regarding whether women's share in employment sustained by exports is significantly higher in indirect channels (upstream suppliers of firms that subsequently export) or direct channels (the exporting firms themselves), according to estimates from the OECD Statistics and Data Directorate, women's share in employment within indirect channels is significantly greater. For instance, in Germany, women accounted for only 20% of jobs directly associated with manufacturing exports in 2014, whereas they constituted nearly 35% of jobs that were indirectly sustained through trade. This may be an indicator of productivity as firms that are directly involved in trade are those that can bear the fixed costs and costs related to trade such as standards certification and transport, suggesting that women employed in trade-related activities are in lower productivity and less secure channels.

Table 4. Female Ownership/ Management, Sector of Operation and GVC Participation (%)

	GVC		Non-GVC	
Sector	Women-Owned	Women Managed	Women-Owned	Women Managed
Food	35.08	11.23	34.74	16.62
Textiles & Garments	44.59	18.52	43.31	27.01
Leather	36.02	8.79	17.60	5.77
Wood	28.12	8.33	19.73	8.81
Publishing	16.67	0.00	22.39	4.17
Chemicals	34.05	10.77	34.76	13.66
Rubber & Plastic	35.29	11.20	34.61	17.70
Machinery	29.20	6.56	23.74	7.29
Fabricated Metals	32.41	7.24	26.49	8.24
Furniture	38.89	6.92	20.53	6.57
Electronics	30.00	16.51	34.80	17.89
Other Manufacturing	35.70	13.25	28.59	13.54
Services	34.93	14.63	34.17	18.85
Wholesale	32.27	6.74	25.51	12.98

Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Note: - GVC refers to *GVC1:* firms that export and import simultaneously (Dovis and Zaki, 2020); the results represent the percentage of firms in a given sector that are in GVCs (or not) for each ownership type (ex: 65% of men-owned firms integrated into GVCs are operating in the food sector).

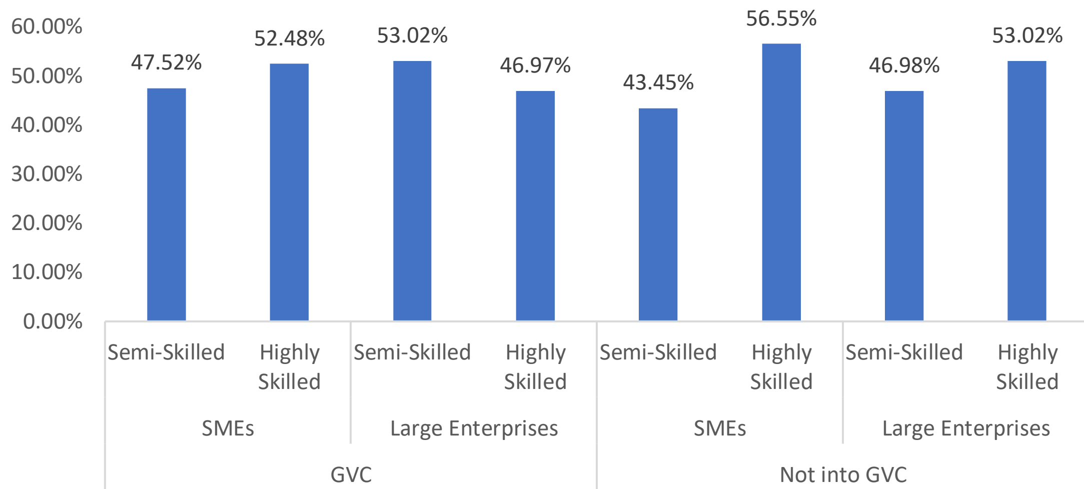
Figure 3. Average Number of Full-Time Permanent and Temporary Women Production Workers and GVC Participation



Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Note: GVC1 refers to firms that export and import simultaneously, GVC2 = GVC1 + international certification, GVC3= GVC1+ share of its capital owned by a foreign firm, GVC4 combines the four criteria altogether (Dovis and Zaki, 2020).

Taking into account the skill levels of workers, Figure 4 below depicts the average proportion of permanent full-time employees in semi-skilled and highly skilled production roles within both SMEs and large enterprises, involved or not in GVCs. Interestingly, SMEs in GVCs tend to employ a higher proportion of highly skilled than semi-skilled workers, while larger firms in GVCs show the opposite trend. SMEs and large firms not engaged in GVCs both employ a more highly skilled workers, though for SMEs the proportion is larger. This suggests that SMEs provide more opportunities for highly skilled jobs for youth, especially when compared to large trading companies. Taken together with the results in Table 3 indicating lack of an educated workforce is a major barrier to firms in GVCs, this may also suggest that larger trading firms face a critical shortage of skilled workers, which poses limitations on their ability to adapt, compete effectively, and access crucial markets. This then creates an opportunity for skilled employment for youth in trade.

Figure 4. Firms' Size, GVC Integration and the Average Percentage of Permanent Full-Time Semi and Highly Skilled Production Workers



Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Notes: GVC refers to *GVC1:* firms that export and import simultaneously (Dovis and Zaki, 2020); firm is considered SME if the number of employees is less than or equal 99 and large if the number of employees is greater than or equal 100; only semi and highly skilled workers are included in the analysis.

Skill shortages and mismatches affect both youth as entrepreneurs of trading SMEs and as employees in trading firms. Young women may be differently affected and experience different opportunities, often represented in lower-skilled, lower-wage jobs, though trade may provide an avenue for more stable employment. Taken together, these results indicate that the human capital presented by youth can address these skill shortages through the provision of adequate training and skill development opportunities.

DIGITAL SKILLS

When considering the role of youth as employees in trading companies, one area of opportunity where youth have an advantage is digital skills. McKinsey's research underscores that youth are proficient at swiftly adopting digital technologies and represent a substantial segment of digital consumers and e-commerce users. In Southeast Asia, for example, young people comprise over 70% of digital consumers. This demographic's digital literacy, capacity to adapt to emerging technologies and active engagement in online marketplaces position them as key drivers of the expanding realms of digital trade and e-commerce. They play a vital role in propelling international trade in digital goods and services forward and are assuming an increasingly pivotal role in trade facilitation through digitalization, capitalizing on their tech-savviness and innovative outlook. Notably, youth are exploring cutting-edge technologies like blockchain and the Internet of Things (IoT) to optimize supply chain management, thereby strengthening transparency and traceability in trade operations (World Economic Forum – Annual Report, 2021).

The digital transformation offers vast opportunities for participation in trade. However, the benefits of digital transformation are currently not equally balanced between societal groups and genders, and access, use, and ownership of digital tools are not gender neutral (OEDC, 2018). The digital gender divide has multiple underlying causes, including barriers related to access, affordability, education, and technological literacy. Additionally, ample evidence suggests inherent biases and socio-cultural norms contribute to the exclusion of women from the digital realm (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2015; Hilbert, 2011; Cooper, 2006). According to the OECD, there is a notable gender disparity globally in smartphone ownership and mobile internet access; women are 26% less likely to possess a smartphone than men. In South Asia and Africa, these disparities are even more pronounced. Moreover, although digital technologies have the potential to empower everyone, women tend to engage with fewer digital services than men and often lack confidence in using the Internet. For example, when it comes to mobile money accounts, which are an effective means of promoting financial inclusion, fewer women own and utilize such accounts. To address these disparities and empower women in the digital age, capacity building can help women harness the full potential of e-commerce and digital tools for trade.

Additionally, the gender gap within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education has wide-ranging implications for young women and men in their capacity to access and leverage green opportunities that are pivotal in promoting sustainability and addressing environmental challenges (Mulla, 2023). Historically, women have been underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Girls face significant barriers in education, with approximately 132 million girls not attending school worldwide (UNESCO, 2023). Gender stereotypes and biases in educational materials and teaching practices discourage girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) studies, leading to low representation in critical sectors such as healthcare technology, environmental fields, and top executives in private companies (Mulla, 2023). This underrepresentation extends into sectors crucial to environmental sustainability, such as renewable energy, environmental science, and conservation. In addition, this limited representation adversely affects women's prospects for pursuing careers in green industries, hindering their access to valuable green job opportunities (NSF, 2020) that often provide higher earning potential, thereby impacting their economic empowerment (UN Women, 2018).

By eliminating the gender gap within STEM education and fostering inclusivity within green industries, society can harness the diverse skills, talents, and perspectives of all young individuals to collectively build a more sustainable future. Addressing these barriers necessitates a concerted focus on policies and initiatives that stimulate the interest and active participation of young women in STEM education and careers. Such efforts encompass targeted support for STEM programmes that address gender disparities, the promotion of mentorship and role modeling, and active endeavors to challenge deeply ingrained gender biases within educational and workplace settings. For instance, the ILO Digital Skills for Decent Jobs for Youth campaign unites the efforts of 22 United Nations entities, the private sector, foundations, governments, and other partners to incentivize a range of stakeholders and to train 5 million young women and men with job-ready digital skills by 2030. One concrete deliverable that stakeholders can commit to undertake is to implement programmes designed to equip more young women with job-ready digital skills (Decent Jobs for Youth, 2018).

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Private stakeholders and enterprises have also made substantial contributions promoting the role of youth in trade through many effective and fruitful collaborations among government, private sector, and local education institutions. As with youth in their entrepreneurial roles, these partnerships have been instrumental in achieving a key goal: enhancing the skills and capabilities of young individuals through reskilling and upskilling initiatives. Tripney et al. (2013) highlight how Aid for Trade programmes that focus on enhancing the ability of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions to align with industry needs have been helpful in positively shaping youth employment outcomes. Evidence from 20 different TVET interventions in various countries in Latin America, East and South Asia, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates their success. Thus, by equipping young individuals with relevant industry-aligned skills, these programmes have effectively bridged the gap between the education system and gaps in the job market.

Despite the success demonstrated by these partnerships in enhancing youth skills and meeting international job market requirements, some obstacles hinder the sustainability of private-public partnerships. For instance, replicating successful apprenticeship systems in countries that lack the relevant historical and institutional arrangements has proven to be a challenging task. This suggests that achieving positive outcomes in one environment is not sufficient to determine success factors; instead, applying lessons learned and scaling effective programmes should take into the relevant socio-economic context. Moreover, several aspects have not been adequately addressed. Firstly, many young people in disadvantaged communities or rural areas lack access to these types of training opportunities. Secondly, these partnerships often fail to address social and gender inclusion gaps, thereby neglecting the other barriers and discrimination that may be faced by certain groups of young people, especially based on gender. Given challenges in replicating successes, programmes should be adapted to the social, cultural, and historical context. As mentioned previously, access to finance and resources also stands as another significant gap that may hinder the success of these partnerships and programmes. Despite possessing the necessary entrepreneurial skills, many young entrepreneurs lack the financial support and resources required to implement their ideas and start new businesses. Hence, addressing these remaining gaps requires the intervention and collaboration of various stakeholders, including governments, private sector, civil society, organisations, and youth themselves.

Case study

An example of a promising partnership is the collaboration between the Chinese multinational conglomerate Alibaba group and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) through the Alibaba eFounders Fellowship Programme launched in 2017. This program aims to empower 1000 entrepreneurs from developing countries to become agents of digital transformation in their respective nations. It welcomes entrepreneurs operating open platforms related to e-commerce, logistics, fintech, big data, or tourism and employs a rigorous selection process that prioritizes social responsibility and gender diversity. Moreover, it is designed to help bridge the digital divide faced by young entrepreneurs in these regions, allowing them to seize inclusive opportunities provided by e-commerce ecosystems. As an initial step, the programme involves sharing first-hand experiences on the transformative power of e-commerce and technology. Then, fellows benefit from a two-week immersive experience at the Alibaba Business School Campus, including site visits. Finally, participants are committed to sharing their newfound knowledge with communities, contributing to UNCTAD's research, and actively participating in their events as advocates of the economy.

SOCIAL CAPITAL / NETWORKS

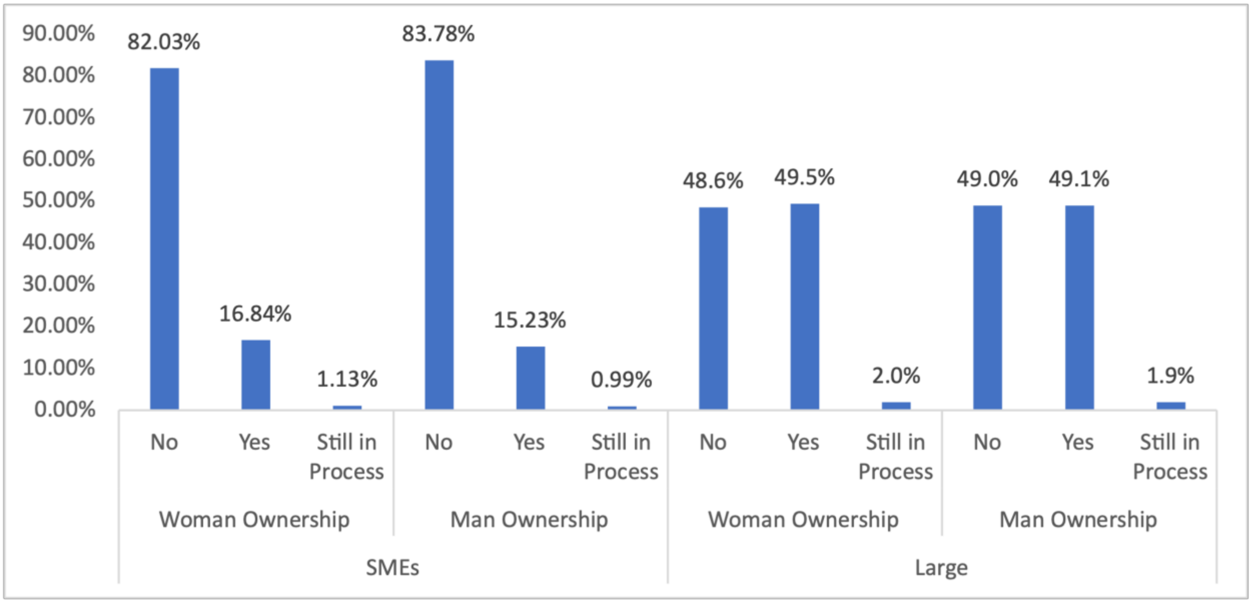
The challenges faced by women and youth in the context of prevailing social norms are multifaceted. Notably, a critical issue that has been observed is their limited organisational presence, making it difficult to engage with and address their specific needs (Smith, 2019). To tackle this predicament and foster an environment conducive to their empowerment, the establishment of youth business associations is recommended. In recent years, several youth business associations have emerged across the global south to provide essential support and resources to young entrepreneurs and to provide exposure to wider opportunities in growing their businesses. As an example, the UK-based Youth Business International (YBI), a global network of independent organisations that support young entrepreneurs, operates in various countries, by offering mentorship, training, and access to finance, enabling them to initiate and expand their businesses. According to the 2019 Impact Report, YBI successfully provided business advice to 40,328 young individuals, granted access to finance to 14,619, matched 9,278 with mentors, offered training to 75,584, and extended support services to 165,977 members of the youth community (Youth Business International, 2019).

However, it is important to recognise that the effectiveness of these associations depends on how well their internal structure is designed to support and promote sustainability as well as the level of support and engagement they receive from governmental bodies and other stakeholders (Jones et al., 2020), which is often limited compared to larger associations, specifically due to their lack of social capital. Whilst these associations are able to organise and connect youth entrepreneurs, they are often not as successful in engaging at the policy level. Additionally, associations and the services they provide tend to focus on youth in entrepreneurship roles rather than their role in the employment market, which not only creates a skills gap in markets with high un- and under-employment rates, but also potentially limits the competitiveness of export sectors. At the same time, youth and SMEs often suggest that larger private sector networks, including those that represent corporations and sector-based associations, do not address their concerns or represent their interests. To remedy this, these networks can make a dedicated effort to attract young entrepreneurs as valuable members who can provide useful business linkages and exposure to innovation.

STANDARDS, SUSTAINABILITY, & YOUTH AS CONSUMERS

In terms of standards, Figure 5 shows that only 16.84% of women-owned and 15.23% of men-owned SMEs possess international quality certification compared to 49.5% of women-owned and 49.1% of men-owned large firms. This indicates that, while women and men entrepreneurs have similar use of quality certifications, a significant gap in use of standards still exists between SMEs and large corporations. This may indicate that the obstacles faced by firms with respect to standards are size-specific barriers and may affect youth more as owners of smaller businesses.

Figure 5. Firms' Size and International Quality Certification from a Gender Lens



Source: Constructed by the authors using the WBES.
Notes: The firm is considered SME if the number of employees is less than or equal 99 and large if the number of employees is greater than or equal 100. - The bars add up to 100% for each type of ownership in each size.

Nonetheless, young consumers have substantial purchasing power, and their choices have the potential to instigate meaningful change in the business landscape. According to Pineau et al., 2020, young consumers can opt to endorse companies that place a quality on sustainability and eco-friendly value chains. Their preferences and decisions serve as a compelling catalyst, compelling businesses to embrace and implement environmentally responsible practices (Pineau et al., 2020).

Education and awareness campaigns also play a pivotal role in promoting sustainability and responsible commerce. Young people engage in these initiatives, educating both their peers and the wider public about the significance of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, youth-led initiatives, including youth councils and sustainability organizations, have a direct and influential role in engaging with businesses and government bodies. They work collaboratively to advocate for sustainability standards and promote responsible commerce (UNIDO, 2021). These youth-led efforts actively shape the business environment by fostering sustainability and ethical practices within both the public and private sectors. Youth-led initiatives, such as youth councils and sustainability organizations, can directly engage with businesses and governments to promote sustainability standards and responsible commerce (UNIDO, 2021).

Case Study: Youth-Led Sustainability Council in Brazil

Brazil, a major player in international agricultural trade, faces ongoing challenges related to sustainability and responsible commerce. In response to these challenges, a youth-led initiative known as the Youth Sustainability Council of Brazil (YSCB) was established. The YSCB represents a unique blend of youth councils and sustainability organizations, directly engaging with businesses and government bodies to promote sustainability standards and responsible commerce. The primary objectives of YSCB are to: empower young leaders to actively participate in promoting sustainable practices and responsible commerce; collaborate with local businesses to encourage sustainable practices and environmental responsibility, and advocate for policies that support responsible commerce and sustainable agriculture.

YSCB operates through a network of regional youth councils, each focusing on specific sustainability challenges in their area. The main activities and initiatives include business partnerships, youth-led sustainability projects, government advocacy, and sustainability awareness campaigns. The YSCB has made substantial progress in promoting sustainability and responsible commerce in Brazil. Even though it has made some progress, YSCB faces challenges such as funding constraints, the need for continued engagement with businesses, and the importance of addressing the complex issues related to sustainable agriculture in Brazil.

The Youth Sustainability Council of Brazil showcases the potential of youth-led initiatives in driving sustainable practices and responsible commerce. Key lessons include the importance of partnership with local businesses, engagement with government bodies, and the role of education in promoting responsible consumer choices. In regions with significant agricultural and trade activities, initiatives like YSCB can empower young people to actively contribute to sustainability and responsible commerce.

REMAINING GAPS: CHALLENGES WITH YOUTH POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Although the role of young people in trade and economic development is gaining necessary attention, gaps remain. Despite the profusion of policies and programmes focused on youth entrepreneurship and employment, as well as the lessons learned that can enable scale-up and wider application, these policies encounter different challenges that lead to ineffectiveness or gaps.

1. **Lack of recognition of youth contributions:** Young men and women that are engaged in various roles such as traders, entrepreneurs, researchers, and policymakers among others still suffer significantly from invisibility, poor working conditions, and a general lack of recognition of their economic contribution. By overlooking young women and men's contribution to trade and economic development, nations are neglecting a significant proportion of their trade. Addressing the role young people play in mainstream trade policymaking will strengthen the notion that the youth are an integral part of trade, economic growth, and development.

2. **Data gaps:** The unavailability of reliable data on young people's participation in trade in statistical databases at national, regional, and multilateral levels compounds adequate reflection of their trading activities and contribution to economic growth. This is particularly notable in developing countries who may face capacity constraints to collecting statistics on economic activities undertaken by young people. The absence of such data makes it difficult to capture and understand the different dynamics at play to better inform trade laws and policies.

3. **Lack of access to education and training:** Inadequate access to quality education and vocational training options can restrict the effectiveness of youth policies in providing opportunities for skill development and employment. Some low-income countries, as identified by the World Bank (2018), continue to face significant challenges related to the lack of access to quality education.

4. **Macroeconomic challenges and lack of funding:** Some policies, even if successful at building skills, are faced with macroeconomic difficulties, such as high youth unemployment, inflation, and economic crises, which hinder the job market's ability to absorb young workers (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, insufficient financial resources allocated to youth policies delay implementation. In Pakistan, for instance, Al-Samarrai and Zaman's study (2011) found that inadequate funding for education and vocational training programmes limited the impact of youth policies, particularly in rural areas.

5. **Instability:** Countries that are experiencing political instability often witness frequent changes in government, disrupting the continuity of youth policies. The Middle East, during the Arab Spring, is an example where political turmoil led to disruptions in youth policies (El-Zoghbi, 2012). Some nations that are affected by conflict and security concerns may also face difficulties in effectively implementing youth policies, as these issues disrupt education, employment, and social services (UNDP, 2015).

6. **Ineffective implementation and monitoring:** Additionally, ineffective policy implementation and monitoring result in a lack of tangible results. Some African countries, as highlighted in a report by the African Development Bank Group (2016), grapple with challenges related to the implementation and monitoring of youth employment policies, ultimately leading to limited impact. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of youth policies are crucial for receiving feedback and making necessary adjustments to ensure their success, and for determining where to allocate limited public resources for effective and cost-effective results (International Labor Organization, 2013).

7. **Policy fragmentation:** Policy fragmentation, where different government departments or agencies work independently on youth-related issues, can result in a lack of coordination and synergy. The Organization of American States (2017) underscored the need for improved coordination among government bodies to enhance the effectiveness of youth policies.

8. Lack of youth engagement in policy processes: Another critical reason for the policy gap is the lack of youth engagement in the policymaking process, which may not adequately address the real needs of young people. Research in Ghana by André and Velde (2017) demonstrated that youth policies were more successful when young people actively participated in their development. In addition to the lack of engagement of youth in the policymaking process, some deep-rooted social and cultural norms further impede young people's full participation, particularly in regions where gender, ethnicity, or social status discrimination prevails (UNICEF, 2017).Research in Ghana by André and Velde (2017) demonstrated that youth policies were more successful when young people actively participated in their development. In addition to the lack of engagement of youth in the policymaking process, some deep-rooted social and cultural norms further impede young people's full participation, particularly in regions where gender, ethnicity, or social status discrimination prevails (UNICEF, 2017).

Addressing Gaps in Youth Leadership and Participation in Policymaking

In today's globalized economy, the active participation of young women and men in trade holds increasing importance. Their capacity for innovations, digital fluency, and fresh perspectives has the potential to stimulate economic growth and reshape the landscape of international commerce. Roles of youth in leadership and policymaking may include innovation and technology, global perspective, sustainability, and entrepreneurship (World Youth Report and OECD, WTO 2019). Nevertheless, several barriers hinder their participation. To unlock the full potential of youth in trade, it is important to implement gender-inclusive policies, provide educational and training opportunities, foster digital empowerment, and establish mentorship programmes.

Young women and men face several challenges in leadership and policymaking, many of which are rooted in social and cultural norms. These age-based norms are often compounded by gender stereotypes and biases, making it difficult for young individuals of all genders to excel in these roles and establish themselves in these positions (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, implicit biases tend to affect women in particular. Women face challenges in accessing education, employment, and political participation due to restricted opportunities, gender stereotypes, and biases. A relevant example previously discussed is the gender gap in STEM education, which limits the ability of young women to participate in more skilled and higher value-added trade activities in both entrepreneurship and employment, particularly excluding them as drivers of innovation. Within services sectors such as transportation and logistics, gender stereotyping assumes that the difficult and dangerous working conditions of these jobs and the physical strength they require are not suitable for women. Such stereotypes create biased perceptions that affects the evaluation of women in the workforce (Heilman and Parks-Stamm, 2007).

Additionally, the representation of young people, especially women, in political spheres remains low. The global proportion of Members of Parliament under the age of 30 is 2.8 %, and women comprise only 26.1 % of national parliamentarians (IPU, 2023). At this rate, it will take several decades to achieve gender parity in politics. Therefore, addressing age-based norms, implicit biases, and gender disparities is essential to ensure the full and equal participation of women and youth in leadership and policymaking, which is crucial for sustainable development and achieving the SDGs.

The participation of women in leadership and policymaking is crucial for sustainable development. Women in decision-making roles can generate positive outcomes for companies and societies. Research by Frank Recruitment Group in 2022 has shown that companies led by women tend to perform better, with 87% of the top 500 companies led by a woman reporting above average profits. In contrast, only 78% of companies with a man as CEO achieved the same level of success (Observer Foundation Research, 2023). Their presence can also inspire future generations of young women leaders, engage youth, and contribute to greater gender equality, while prioritizing social issues that lead to a more equitable and sustainable society. Ample evidence suggests economically empowered women invest more in education and healthcare for their families, improving youth outcomes, and that women’s participation in leadership bodies are more likely to lead to inclusive decisions (Women Deliver, 2023).

Integrating young women and men into trade policymaking and leadership requires a holistic approach that combines education, inclusion, active engagement, and access to networks and mentorship. First, the establishment of specialized educational programmes and courses in the field of trade policy and international economics is a foundational step (UNCTAD, 2020). These educational initiatives should not only equip participants with the necessary knowledge but should also provide scholarship opportunities and financial assistance, thus empowering young individuals to pursue higher education and expertise in trade (World Bank, 2018). The YouthConnekt programme in Rwanda, which includes the YouthConnekt Academy, illustrates how youth can be successfully engaged in trade-related activities, entrepreneurship, and policymaking through education. Since its launch in 2012, the programme has reached 4,000,000 young women and men between the age of 16-30 for leadership training and mindset changes through boot camps, campaigns, social media events and YouthConnekt forums, and 15,000 youth have participated in the national dialogue council so far (UNDP, 2018).

In conjunction with these educational efforts, it is crucial to offer tailored leadership development programmes designed to prepare young aspirants in the area of trade policymaking and leadership roles. These programmes should encompass vital skills such as negotiation skills, trade law, and international relations (International Labour Organization, 2019), which serve as a crucial preparation ground for emerging leaders in the trade sector. Many countries have already established youth councils, advisory boards, or forums that enable young people to participate in policy decisions. For instance, the National Youth Council of Uganda actively engages in discussions on trade and economic issues.

In addition, it is vital to establish online platforms and discussion forums aimed at fostering the exchange of insights and policy proposals among young professionals engaged in trade (World Trade Organization, 2020). These platforms encourage active participation in global trade dialogues and debates, thereby promoting a vibrant exchange of ideas (UNCTAD, 2019).

Complementary to these online engagement efforts, providing apprenticeships within government trade departments, trade associations, and international organizations is also instrumental (WTO, 2019). These hands-on experiences offer practical exposure to the trade field, nurture young talent, and bridge the gap between theoretical learning and real-world application, thus reinforcing their suitability for leadership roles. For example, the Government of Malawi introduced a Graduate Internship Programme (GIP) in 2018 to provide work-integrated experience to graduates under the age of 35 to improve their employability. Every year, youth graduates without employment are allocated to various government Ministries, Departments and Agencies to work as interns. As of June 2023, a total of 13,454 graduates have been engaged in the programme in 8 different cohorts (Ministry of Labour, Republic of Malawi 2023).

Finally, the World Youth Report by the UN recommends that youth should be offered various support networks ranging from peer connections and mentoring systems. Creating mentorship programmes that connect young individuals with experienced trade policymakers and leaders can provide guidance and build leadership skills for youth. Regional bodies can help create these linkages and opportunities, including the initiatives of the African Union (AU), including the African Union Youth Volunteer Corps, which regularly provides networking opportunities for young professionals to connect with experts in the field to enhance their trade leadership potential. The African Youth Volunteer Corps (AU-YVC) recruits and deploys young African professionals as volunteers to various countries across the continent, offering young people an opportunity to gain practical experience, share their skills and knowledge, and work alongside experts in areas such as healthcare, education, agriculture, and more.

GLOBAL PRACTICE ON YOUTH CONSIDERATIONS IN TRADE AGREEMENTS

An approach emerging globally to address the challenges of young women and men in trade agreements is ensuring trade agreements do not result in unequal outcomes and address underlying barriers to guarantee women and youth can leverage the agreements. Globally, integrating gender and youth considerations in trade agreements through dedicated provisions is a new area. As a result, there is no standard practice; instead, youth-related provisions take different forms and are found in various sections of trade agreements. In many agreements, provisions explicitly mentioning youth are mainly found in the chapters and sections such as labour standards, education, capacity and training, entrepreneurship, and small businesses, and in recent times digital trade. Just as with provisions on youth, there is no unique definition for youth or marginalized groups in trade agreements. The closest to a detailed definition encompassing women, youth, and other marginalized groups is found in Article 1 of the Framework for the Establishment of the EAC Common Market which provides that, “vulnerable groups are groups of people marginalized on grounds of stigmatization, illness, gender, ethnicity, disability or age”.

Apart from youth-specific provisions, a number of trade agreements contain provisions or measures that are not specific to youth but implicitly favour vulnerable and marginalized groups under which women and youth fall. These provisions seek to enhance women and youth economic empowerment and their ability to benefit from the opportunities created by trade agreements. Such measures include provisions where state parties to the agreement agree to cooperate to or propose measures that alleviate key challenges encountered by MSMEs in their participation in trade. Since MSMEs owned and led by youth, particularly young women, face disproportionate challenges, such implicit provisions can provide a level playing field. This is particularly true when combined with the increasing trend of incorporating gender provisions in trade agreements. While the global economy witnessed a proliferation of gender provisions in regional trade agreements, only 20% of them include explicit chapters or clauses that endeavor to achieve gender equality and to empower women (Monteiro, 2021). Research conducted by the WTO on SME-related provisions showed that about 136 trade agreements notified to the WTO contained considerations on SMEs, which may benefit youth and women as entrepreneurs (Monteiro, 2016). The research further revealed that the SME-related provisions were highly heterogeneous. While some Regional Trade Agreements (RTA) identify youth participation as part of a non-exhaustive list of potential cooperation areas, other RTAs establish firmer cooperation commitments. Still, most are not subject to the dispute settlement mechanism of the agreement and therefore are difficult to enforce.

Few studies measure the effectiveness of these gender provisions. In one case, López Mourelo and Samaan (2018) assess the average effect of the 1999 Cambodia-US Bilateral Textile Agreement (CUSBTA) on the gender wage gap, specifically its labour provisions that aim to improve working conditions through eliminating discrimination between employees and reducing the gender-wage gap. The results show that CUSBTA and its specific implementation mechanism reduced the gender wage gap and wage discrimination in the Cambodian textile industry. They attribute this reduction directly to the agreement’s labour provisions, and specifically to its monitoring mechanism.

A second example can be drawn from the agreements in three African sub-regions[4] that recognise networks as a viable means of empowerment, urging their respective member states to cooperate on, render support to, and promote women and youth organisations and professional associations as a means of ensuring their involvement in economic development. Though a specific implementation mechanism is not necessarily attached to the provisions, member states initiated the 50 Million African Women Speak project to support networking and access to information. The platform has spread to 36 countries with 9990 monthly users, and an impact assessment of the project shows that the platform is highly responsive to the specific needs identified by women entrepreneurs in Africa (African Development Bank, 2021). This indicates that even cooperation-based provisions may create the conditions necessary for effective and responsive implementation structures, and that trade agreements can be effective in supporting access to networks for youth and young women.

Additionally, using the WBES and the WTO dataset on gender provisions in trade agreements, Kalliny and Zaki (2023) show that gender provisions on average exert a positive impact on women's ownership and women employees, and a negative impact on women managers and production workers. In the Middle East and North Africa region, the impact remains positive for women employees but becomes non-significant for the other measurements of women's employment. The non-significant impact may be due to the de jure inclusion of employment-related gender provisions in trade agreements without an enforcement mechanism. Therefore, they propose that the effectiveness of gender provisions may rely more on their enforcement than on their quantity or length.

Examples of youth considerations in trade agreements

Labour

Trade agreements that incorporate youth considerations as part of labour standards include the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. In Article 17.7(d), the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) provides that, "labour laws mean labour protections for children and young people including a minimum age for the employment of children and the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour".

Similarly, Article 18.7 of the Australia-USA FTA provides that, "internationally recognized labour principles and rights refer to labour protections for children and young people, including a minimum age for the employment of children and the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour.

Article 15 of the SADC Protocol on Employment and Labour provides that State Parties shall with due regard to the means available afford preferential employment opportunities for the youth, women, and persons with disability.

Article 7 also makes provision for minimum working age, adjust labour regulations applicable to young workers so that their specific development and vocational training and access to employment needs are met. Young

[4] COMESA, ECA, ECOWAS

people are also entitled to receive initial vocational training of a sufficient duration to enable them to adapt to the requirement of their future working life and for young workers.

Small Businesses and Entrepreneurship

Article15(d) of SADC Protocol on Employment and labour provides that state parties are to provide support structures to be set up to assist entrepreneurs in the establishment and development of small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Article 5.5 of the ASEAN Free Trade Area mandates its member states to develop and implement an implementation mechanism in the form of a trade facilitation work programme with concrete actions, measures, targets, and timelines with one objective being to help SMEs) to save time and reduce trade costs.

Education, Capacity and Training

Under Article of the COMESA Social charter, Member States are to provide enhanced job opportunities and adequate employment, and entrepreneurship and recreational activities for the youth to contribute to their economic and social productivity. Member States are also to enhance job opportunities for persons with disabilities and the youth through increased investments in education and vocational training.

Marginalised groups

The Chile-Uruguay agreement in its chapter on cross-border trade in services provides another excellent example of implicit provisions that can be interpreted and applied to benefit young service providers or suppliers. Specifically, the agreement empowers Uruguay to reserve the right to adopt and maintain measures that grant preferences and rights to socially or economically disadvantaged groups.

A new approach to youth and gender considerations in trade agreements

Currently, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) presents a fresh approach to gender-mainstreaming and youth inclusivity in FTAs worth emulating. The AfCFTA integrates gender equality and youth considerations into State Parties' trade policies through strategies for the implementation of the Agreement. As part of its general objectives, the Agreement in Article 3(d) emphasizes the promotion of inclusive socio-economic development as part of the Agreement's general objectives. Specifically, State Parties seek to "attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and structural transformation of State Parties". In Article 27(2)(d) of the Protocol on Trade in Services, AfCFTA State Parties acknowledge the importance of mobilizing resources to "improve the export capacity of formal and informal service suppliers with particular attention to MSMEs, women, and youth service suppliers.

At the national level, an important mechanism adopted by State Parties is mainstreaming gender and youth considerations into national implementation strategies of the AfCFTA. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, this approach reaffirms State Parties commitment and understanding that, for the benefits of the AfCFTA to be reaped fully, domestic policy measures must be designed to correct for inequalities likely to arise from increased intra-African trade. Senegal's National Strategy for the implementation of AfCFTA provides a perfect illustration of this approach with priority activities in its action plan including activities that increase women and youth's contribution in developing productive capacities. Senegal's action plan further includes measures that create new opportunities for women and youth to access export markets for goods and services (AfCFTA Secretariat & UNDP, 2020). As evidenced by research, the impact of the AfCFTA on women and youth will differ from one State Party to the other; as a result, national implementation strategies can be a particularly fruitful approach to making trade agreements contextually relevant and domestically effective for women and youth (Bayat, 2022).

Perhaps the most important best practice example of the AfCFTA is its State Parties' commitment to conclude a separate Protocol dedicated to women and youth. Once concluded and adopted, the AfCFTA's protocol on women and youth in trade will be the first attempt by a trade agreement to dedicate a whole protocol to addressing women and youth considerations in trade globally. The protocol is thus a welcome deviation from the norm of indirect and non-binding references to women and youth intrade agreements.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young women and men represent a significant percentage of the world's workforce and enterprises and thus play an important role in shaping the future of commerce and trade. Moreover, evidence indicates that, while inequalities may restrict the participation of youth in trade and limit the effectiveness of trade, inclusive trade laws, policies, and strategies can address these barriers and lead to increased economic growth and poverty reduction. Trade agreements, policies, and programmes can therefore be made more inclusive for marginalised groups and address the challenges faced by women and youth in trade. The potential benefits of gender provisions for women business owners and employees demonstrate a promising precedent for integrating youth considerations in trade agreements. Further efforts are required to enhance the enforceability, monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability of these provisions, policies, and programmes, and the inclusion of youth in leadership and policymaking.

This paper demonstrates that non-tariff barriers are disproportionately experienced by women and youth and come at a greater cost than formal trade barriers, so the removal of tariffs through free trade agreements is not sufficient to enable youth and women to trade equitably and in fact may widen the competitiveness gap. To address this issue, trade agreements that address non-tariff barriers faced by women and youth through targeted trade facilitation measures can incent participation in formal trade. Inclusive implementation of these trade agreements can also address underlying inequalities and ensure women and youth can leverage their benefits. The main barrier to identifying best practices and recommendations is the lack of research measuring impacts of trade provisions and their implementation on the ability of youth to leverage trade agreements and ultimately on addressing issues of equality and improving youth economic empowerment. More research is needed in this area.

Although trade agreements are important tools for economic growth and development, they can also have unintended consequences that disproportionately affect marginalized groups such as women and youth. Based on the evidence presented in this paper, a number of actions are recommended to address this and to improve the ability of youth to leverage trade agreements:

- Stakeholders involved in trade negotiations can conduct prior inclusive assessments to determine the potential impact of trade agreements and policies on marginalized population groups. Such impact assessments examine in detail how the FTA would affect women and young people's economic participation in trade, their labor rights, political, educational and social rights.
- Governments and private sector associations engaged in trade negotiations can seek input from women and youth groups on proposed trade policies at all levels of the negotiation process. Such engagements would ensure the particular needs of women and youth in trade are taken into consideration to reduce the adverse effects of trade agreements on them. Similarly, women and youth in trade should be involved in trade-related decision making at all levels. Such involvement should go beyond their involvement in the negotiation process and extend to the implementation of trade agreements.
- Governments engaged in trade negotiations can include specific provisions on women and youth in trade in the legal frameworks. Such provisions should address issues mostly faced by young women and men in trade, particularly non-tariff barriers, such as their access to finance, equal pay, discrimination, and harassment. The provisions can be enforceable and tied to concrete implementation and monitoring mechanisms linked to evidence on effective policies.

- Successful policies and programmes creating an enabling environment for young women and men in entrepreneurship and employment can be scaled including through public-private partnerships taking into account the relevant context.
- Capacity building and technical support should be provided to women and young people to participate in international trade in areas access to credit, market access, trade regulations, and business development services, with a focus on maximising opportunities in area such as digital skills.

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