



# The Role of Women in International Trade

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# Introduction

In the field of international trade, the role of women has become increasingly significant, and it is important to understand the various factors that have contributed to their involvement in this arena. Women, historically, have been underrepresented in international trade, mainly due to social, cultural, and traditional norms in many countries. However, with advancements in education and technology, many women have been breaking barriers and achieving success in international trade.

This white paper aims to explore the position of women in international trade, analyzing the challenges they face, the opportunities present, and how these can be leveraged for their benefit. The white paper will begin by exploring the current state of women's involvement in international trade and will then delve into the various factors that have led to their participation, such as education, globalization, and changing cultural perceptions. Ultimately, this white paper seeks to provide insight into the progress made by women in international trade and to suggest ways in which they can continue to succeed and grow in this field.

## Definition of international trade

International trade refers to the exchange of goods and services between countries. It involves the import and export of goods and services across international borders, and it is an essential component of the global economy. International trade can take place between countries that have different economic systems, political systems, and cultural backgrounds. International trade provides many benefits, including increased competition, access to a wider range of products and services, and economic growth. It also provides a means for countries to specialize in the production of goods and services that they can produce more efficiently than others, allowing them to be more competitive in the global marketplace. International trade is regulated by a variety of organizations and agreements, such as the World Trade Organization, which works to facilitate the flow of goods and services between countries and to ensure that trade is conducted in a fair and sustainable manner. Despite some challenges and controversies that come with international trade, it remains an important engine of global growth and prosperity.

### **Brief history of women's participation in international trade**

Women's participation in international trade has been historically limited. In the early days of international trade, women were almost entirely excluded from participating in trade and commerce altogether. However, this began to change in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when women in Western countries began to advocate for their rights in the workplace. During this time period, women in the United States, Great Britain, and other Western countries became more involved in international trade, often working in industry and commerce. Despite this progress, women's participation in international trade remained limited due to various discriminatory and cultural practices.

Many cultures around the world have long-standing gender norms, which have made it challenging for women to enter the workforce, let alone enter international trade. Today, women continue to face challenges and barriers when participating in international trade, such as discrimination, unequal pay, and a lack of representation in decision-making positions. However, thanks to the work of dedicated activists and organizations, women's involvement in international trade has increased, and progress continues to be made towards greater equality and representation for women in this sector.

Women's participation in international trade has been observed to positively impact the economic growth of both developed and developing countries. International trade has the potential to create jobs and boost economic opportunities within the participating countries. By actively engaging women in international trade, more job opportunities can be created and women can become more financially independent. Women bring different sets of skills and perspectives to the table which can be advantageous in decision making and negotiations. Including women in international trade also promotes gender equality and empowerment, as it allows women to have a greater say in their society's economic growth and development. However, women's active involvement in international trade can be limited by various societal and cultural barriers, such as gender bias, stigmatization of women in business, and discrimination in accessing finance. These barriers can be overcome by implementing policies and initiatives that support and empower women, such as providing financial resources, training programs, and advocating for policies that promote gender equality in the workplace. Ultimately, the inclusion of women in international trade can bring about positive economic and social benefits for their communities and help to bridge the gender gap in the world of business.

# The Current Situation of Women in International Trade

The current situation of women in international trade is still skewed towards men. Despite the progress made towards gender equality, women still face barriers to entry and advancement in the field of international trade. A study conducted by the International Trade Centre found that only 18% of exporting firms are led by women, and those that are led by women tend to be smaller in size than those led by men. Furthermore, women-owned firms face unique challenges such as difficulty accessing credit and operating in traditionally male-dominated industries. Additionally, women are often not represented in decision-making roles in trade negotiations.

Only 31 of the 164 members of the World Trade Organization have a female representative, and women's issues are not always adequately addressed in trade agreements. The COVID-19 pandemic has also disproportionately impacted women in international trade, as they are often employed in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as hospitality and tourism. Addressing the barriers women face in international trade will require a concerted effort by governments, private sector actors, and international organizations to increase access to resources and opportunities for women.

## **Lack of representation at high-level positions**

The lack of representation of women in high-level positions is a deeply-rooted issue that has persisted for decades. Despite the continued efforts of feminist movements and organizations, women continue to be underrepresented in top positions in both public and private sectors. According to a report by the World Economic Forum, only 25% of senior managers and executives globally are women. This is largely due to the systemic barriers that women face, including the gender pay gap, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, and gender bias. The glass ceiling is a real obstacle that prevents women from ascending to high-level positions, leading to a shortage of female role models and a lack of diversity in leadership positions.

Furthermore, research has shown that diverse leadership teams lead to increased innovation and better decision-making. It is essential to have more women in leadership roles, not just for gender equality, but also for economic growth and corporate success. To address this issue, governments

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and organizations must implement policies and initiatives that promote gender diversity in leadership positions, such as quotas, inclusive recruitment and promotion processes, and training programs.

### **Challenges women face in entering the field**

Despite the progress made towards gender equality, women still face several challenges as they try to enter the field of international trade. One of the major challenges is the lack of role models and mentors, as most of the top positions are still dominated by men. This makes it hard for women to find guidance and motivation to pursue their careers. Another challenge is the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, with women often not receiving the same level of support and training as their male counterparts. This can lead to a lack of confidence and skills needed to succeed in the industry. Furthermore, the issue of work-life balance remains a major challenge for women in the field, as the demanding nature of the job can make it difficult to juggle family and career responsibilities. Lastly, the prevalence of gender bias and discrimination can make it hard for women to be taken seriously or to receive fair treatment in their workplaces. These hurdles, among others, make it imperative for women to unite, mentor one another, and advocate for change in the industry.

### **The gender pay gap in international trade**

While efforts have been made to reduce the gender pay gap in many industries, the disparity continues to persist within international trade. This is due to several factors, including the under-representation of women in high-paying positions within the industry, but also a lack of transparency in pay scales and promotion practices. Women often face discrimination in terms of pay, with studies showing that women in the same roles as men earn less, even with equal levels of education and experience. This not only creates financial disparities, but also limits career opportunities for women within the industry and perpetuates gender inequality. Further, cultural norms and expectations around women's roles in society can also contribute to the gender pay gap in international trade. As the industry becomes increasingly globalized and interconnected, it is important to address and eliminate these barriers in order to empower women and create a more equitable and sustainable economy. This can be achieved through increased diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as education and awareness campaigns aimed at challenging harmful stereotypes and biases.

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In addition to government policies, international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) have also recognized the important role that women play in international trade. The WTO has stated that empowering women in trade can lead to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and that gender should be integrated into trade policy in order to promote gender equality. The WTO has also established the Women and Trade Programme, which aims to increase the participation of women in international trade and to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.

This program provides training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to women in the trade sector, and facilitates dialogue and exchange of best practices among governments, businesses, and civil society organizations. By recognizing the importance of gender in trade policy and by providing support and resources to women in the trade sector, the WTO and other international organizations are helping to ensure that women are able to fully participate in and benefit from the global economy.

# The Importance of Women in International Trade

In addition to the economic benefits that women bring to international trade, their participation can also have positive social and political impacts. By empowering women to engage in commerce, they gain greater financial independence and a stronger role in decision-making processes, both within their families and in their communities. This can lead to a shift in power dynamics and a breaking down of traditional gender roles, ultimately promoting gender equality. Furthermore, women in international trade can serve as role models and mentors for future generations of girls, encouraging them to pursue education and career opportunities that may have previously been inaccessible. Additionally, women's involvement in areas such as import/export regulations, market research, and international negotiations ensures that their unique perspectives and experiences are taken into account, which can lead to more inclusive and culturally sensitive trade policies. Therefore, it is crucial for governments, international organizations, and businesses to recognize the vital role of women in international trade and to actively work towards supporting and promoting their participation.

## **Diverse perspectives in decision-making**

In order to make well-informed and effective decisions, it is imperative that diverse perspectives are taken into account. The inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making creates a balanced approach that considers all aspects and possible outcomes of a given situation. This is particularly beneficial in the realm of international trade, as it is a complex and dynamic field that requires strategic analysis and decision-making. The realization of the significant impact of diverse perspectives in decision-making is becoming more prominent in today's society. Through the incorporation of different cultures, genders, backgrounds, and experiences, decision-makers become more open-minded, receptive to alternative ideas, and adaptable to changing circumstances. In the context of international trade, this means that policies and trade negotiations can be approached with a holistic view that considers all stakeholders involved. Additionally, diverse decision-making teams can help ensure that the objectives and needs of various communities are taken into account and addressed accordingly. Ultimately, by incorporating

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diverse perspectives in decision-making, organizations and societies can create a more inclusive and equitable future.

### **Boosting economic growth**

Boosting economic growth requires the active participation of all members of society including women. According to the World Bank report, closing the gender gap in both labor force participation and productivity could add \$28 trillion to global GDP by 2025. This indicates that integrating women into the labor market can lead to substantial economic growth. Encouraging and supporting women entrepreneurs is another way to boost economic growth. Women-owned businesses benefit the economy by creating jobs, generating revenue, and contributing to innovation. In fact, research shows that businesses that have more women in leadership positions tend to be more profitable and successful. Therefore, empowering women to start and grow businesses should be a priority for governments and policymakers. Furthermore, investing in education and training programs for women can have a positive impact on economic growth. Providing access to education and skills training can improve women's productivity and earnings potential, leading to higher economic growth rates. Finally, gender-inclusive policies that promote equal pay, family-friendly work environments, and affordable childcare can also help to increase women's participation in the workforce, leading to higher economic growth.

### **Alleviating poverty in developing countries**

Alleviating poverty in developing countries requires a multi-pronged approach that emphasizes the empowerment and education of women. Women play a significant role in reducing poverty levels because they are often the ones responsible for providing for their families. In many developing countries, women lack access to education and resources, which limits their potential as income earners and decision-makers in their households. Providing women with equal access to education and job training programs can help enhance their employment prospects and increase their earning potential. Additionally, government policies that promote equal pay for women and increasing their representation in leadership positions can help redress gender-based discrimination in the workforce. Other programs that focus on healthcare, nutrition, and sanitation can also boost poverty alleviation efforts by reducing the economic burden associated with preventable illnesses and promoting healthy living. Combining these various strategies can help to create positive change in developing countries. As the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

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highlight, empowering women and reducing poverty are key components of creating a more sustainable and equitable world for all.

Despite the successes and progress made by women in international trade, it is still an area dominated by men. Women often face gender-based barriers and discrimination, such as lack of access to finance and markets, limited opportunities for networking and mentorship, and cultural biases. These obstacles hinder the ability of women to fully participate in international trade and benefit from its growth and opportunities. Moreover, women are disproportionately affected by trade liberalization policies, as they are overrepresented in vulnerable and informal jobs that are easily displaced by global competition. To achieve gender equality in international trade, it is necessary to adopt a gender-responsive approach that considers the specific needs, experiences, and perspectives of women in all aspects of trade policy, including negotiations, implementation, and monitoring. This includes addressing discriminatory practices, building the capacity of women-led enterprises, increasing their access to finance and markets, and promoting gender-balanced participation in decision-making bodies. Only by breaking down these barriers and promoting equal access to opportunities in international trade can we fully recognize the valuable contributions and potential of women in the global economy.

# Strategies for Promoting Women in International Trade

There are several strategies that can be employed to promote women's participation in international trade. Firstly, governments can create policies and incentives that encourage women's entrepreneurial activities, such as providing access to capital and training programmes. Secondly, institutions involved in international trade can ensure gender mainstreaming in all levels of decision-making processes and operations. Thirdly, women-specific support networks, such as trade associations and chambers of commerce, can be established to help women entrepreneurs and traders access market information, grow their businesses, and network with other women in the industry. Fourthly, governments and international organizations can prioritize gender-responsive trade agreements that address the specific needs of women and promote their economic empowerment. Finally, women themselves can be encouraged to take up leadership roles in international trade through programmes that offer mentorship, leadership, and professional development opportunities. Overall, these strategies are critical for promoting women's participation and leadership in international trade, which in turn contributes to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

## **Encouraging education and training for women**

Encouraging education and training for women is one of the most effective ways to empower them in the field of international trade. With increasing globalization, the demand for skilled workers is rising, and education and training are crucial to equip women with the necessary skills to compete on a global level. It is essential to provide them with equal access to quality education and training services to build their economic and personal capacity. Investing in women's education can lead to better health outcomes for women and their families, improve their decision-making abilities, and enhance their economic independence. Providing opportunities for vocational and technical training would also enable them to specialize in specific fields of work, leading to increased employability and higher wages. Women who receive education and training develop a broader world view, can network with other women in the field, and access information about the latest advancements in their industry. Encouraging and supporting education and training for women is a critical component of creating a more inclusive and equitable international

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trade environment, which ultimately benefits everyone, including employers, workers, and societies.

### **Supporting women's entrepreneurship**

In order to support women's entrepreneurship, it is vital to recognize and address the specific challenges that they face. These challenges can range from limited access to capital and markets to cultural and societal norms that discourage women from owning and running businesses. One way to overcome these barriers is through targeted programs and policies that provide women with the necessary resources and support to launch and grow their businesses. This can include access to finance, training and mentoring programs, and networks of other women entrepreneurs. It is also important to raise awareness among both men and women about the benefits of women's entrepreneurship, not only for individual women but also for their families, communities and economies. Encouraging diverse representation in business can lead to a more innovative and sustainable economy. Additionally, recognizing and celebrating the achievements of women entrepreneurs can help to inspire future generations of women to become business leaders.

Ultimately, supporting women's entrepreneurship is essential for achieving gender equality and economic growth.

### **Promoting gender diversity in leadership positions**

Promoting gender diversity in leadership positions is imperative to ensure equal representation and equal opportunity for all genders. Gender diversity in leadership promotes an inclusive environment where all voices are heard and diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. Women in leadership positions provide a different and valuable perspective and bring different skill sets to the table, which can help organizations and societies thrive. However, despite progress made in recent years, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions worldwide, especially in the world of international trade. Several initiatives have been introduced to address this issue, including quotas and affirmative action policies. These policies have proven to be effective in increasing gender diversity in leadership roles in many countries. However, there is still a need for sustained efforts to tackle the underlying bias that prevents women from advancing in the corporate ladder. This includes promoting education and training for women, ensuring that women are not discriminated against, and encouraging men to become

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allies in the fight for gender equality. Gender diversity in leadership is a critical component of building a fairer, more inclusive society.

In spite of the progress women have made in international trade, there is still a significant gender gap in this field. An important factor contributing to this imbalance is the persistent issue of gender discrimination or bias. This can be seen in the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, unequal pay and benefits for the same job roles, and lack of access to certain training and networking opportunities that could help advance their careers. Moreover, the persistence of gender inequality and discrimination continues to perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes, which further restricts women's participation in international trade. Hence, promoting gender equality and removing gender bias in international trade is an essential step towards ensuring women's active participation in trade and their economic empowerment. Achieving this goal requires collaborative efforts from government bodies, private sector and civil society organizations to initiate policies that promote gender equality, equal pay, inclusion, and accessibility to opportunities for women in international trade. It's important to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for women in international trade in order to realize the potential benefits of diversity and reach full economic development.

# Case Studies of Successful Women in International Trade

Case studies of successful women in international trade serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for other women who aspire to establish themselves in this field. These real-life examples showcase the immense potential of women in international trade and highlight their unique contributions to the global economy.

One such case study is that of Lubna Olayan, CEO of Olayan Financing Company, who is the first woman to head a Saudi Arabian company, breaking several patriarchal barriers in the process. She has been instrumental in expanding the company's business interests beyond its oil roots, and today, Olayan Financing Company is a major player in various fields, such as construction materials, food products, and automobiles.

Similarly, Asmaa Al-Ghoul, a Palestinian journalist and human rights activist, leveraged her writing and communication skills to advocate for the rights of Palestinians on the international stage. Her work has been recognized and appreciated globally, and she has become a symbol of empowerment for Palestinian women struggling for justice. These case studies of successful women in international trade demonstrate that gender should not be a hindrance to pursuing one's dreams and goals, and that women are just as capable of impacting the global economy as their male counterparts.

## **Ursula von der Leyen**

Another notable figure in international trade is Ursula von der Leyen. She made history in 2019 as the first female president of the European Commission, the executive branch of the European Union. Before this, von der Leyen had a successful career in politics in Germany, serving as the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. As president of the European Commission, von der Leyen has emphasized the importance of international trade for the EU and has been at the forefront of negotiations with the United Kingdom regarding their withdrawal from the EU. She has also advocated for strengthening the EU's position in global trade by pursuing fair and sustainable trade agreements with other countries. In particular, she has emphasized the need for the EU to take a leadership role in

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addressing climate change through trade policies. Von der Leyen's leadership and commitment to international trade have positioned her as a role model for women in politics and business, and her work is instrumental in shaping the future of the global trade landscape.

### **Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala**

Another prominent woman in international trade is Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who was appointed as the first female and African Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2021. Prior to this, she served as the Minister of Finance in Nigeria and played a key role in negotiating debt relief and economic reforms for the country. Her extensive experience in international finance and development, as well as her leadership skills, have made her a respected figure in global economic circles. Okonjo-Iweala has emphasized the importance of empowering women in the workforce, particularly in the realm of trade. She has argued that women are disproportionately affected by trade policies and that increasing their participation could lead to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Okonjo-Iweala has also stressed the need for greater collaboration among countries to address issues such as climate change and the digital divide. As the head of the WTO, she will be responsible for promoting free trade and reducing trade barriers, while taking into account the diverse needs and perspectives of member states.

### **Christine Lagarde**

Christine Lagarde is a prominent figure in the world of international trade. She serves as the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a position she has held since 2011. Prior to this, Lagarde held various positions in the French government, including Minister of the Economy, Finance and Industry and Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. She is known for her strong leadership skills and her dedication to promoting international cooperation and stability. Under her leadership, the IMF has focused on promoting economic growth and stability, reducing poverty, and addressing issues such as climate change and gender inequality. Lagarde has also been a strong advocate for the role of women in the global economy, recognizing the important contributions that women can make to economic growth and development. She has called for policies that support women's economic empowerment and has emphasized the importance of having more women in leadership positions in the public and private sectors. Through her work and advocacy, Lagarde has become a powerful voice for women in international trade and a symbol of the growing importance of gender equality in the global economy.

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As more women gain access to education and better economic opportunities, their participation in international trade has increased significantly. Evidence shows that female entrepreneurs and business owners often bring unique perspectives, abilities, and skills to commercial activities, contributing to economic growth and development. However, gender-based barriers continue to hinder women's involvement in international trade, including discrimination, lack of access to capital, legal rights, and limited market information. To empower women in international trade, governments, and organizations must adopt policies and initiatives that address these obstacles and promote gender equality. These measures may include providing education and training opportunities, financial and non-financial support for female entrepreneurs, and removing legal and administrative barriers. Furthermore, private sector stakeholders must also commit to creating inclusive workplaces and supply chains that promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Together, these efforts will enhance the role of women in international trade, unlocking the full potential of female entrepreneurs and business owners and contributing to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development.

## Conclusion

It can be said that although women have made significant strides in the field of international trade over the years, there is still a long way to go before a true gender parity is achieved. The existing biases and stereotypes that limit opportunities for women in various fields related to international trade should be fought against. Governments and private organizations should formulate and implement policies that create equal opportunities for men and women. Additionally, women should be encouraged to take up leadership roles in international trade by providing them with the necessary skills and training. Finally, the media should play an influential role in shaping the public's perception of women in international trade.

Women should be celebrated and acknowledged for their contributions to international trade, and such efforts should be highlighted by the media, giving young women the inspiration to take up careers in the field. Only by creating an equal and inclusive environment for all gender identities will the true potential of international trade be realized, thus providing ample opportunities for all.

### **Women are equally as important as men**

The importance of women in international trade is essential to recognize their invaluable contribution to the global economy. Women's participation in international trade has increased significantly in recent years, and their role in the industry is becoming increasingly established. They account for a substantial portion of the workforce that operates in various fields, from microbusinesses to multinational corporations.

Women's participation in international trade has a significant impact on economic development, particularly in developing countries, where they play an increasingly critical role in ensuring global prosperity. Women's presence in international trade also helps to ensure gender equality and women's rights, which are essential in promoting sustainable economic growth. Additionally, by engaging in international trade, women can help promote their independence and financial autonomy and contribute to reducing poverty.

Despite being an essential driver of economic growth and development, women's participation in international trade is often overlooked and undervalued. It is, therefore, crucial to provide women with increased opportunities to participate in international trade and recognize their contributions to ensure the industry's continued growth and sustainable development worldwide.

### **Call to action for greater representation and recognition of women in trade.**

It is imperative to call for greater representation and recognition of women in the field of international trade. Although women's participation in international trade has increased in some sectors, women often encounter systemic barriers, gender-based discrimination, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. As a result, they are deprived of the benefits and opportunities that international trade can offer. Therefore, governments, international organizations, and private sector entities must take urgent steps to promote gender equality and integrate more women into international trade. This could be achieved by providing support and resources to women entrepreneurs and businesses, offering leadership and skills development programs, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and enhancing women's access to finance, technology, and markets. Furthermore, public-private partnerships and collaborations are essential to making trade work for all and ensuring that women are not left behind. Ultimately, by advancing the role of women in international trade, we can create a more inclusive and prosperous future for all.