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Gender-Inclusive Trade Agreements for Women-led Structural Transformation in India

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Abstract

This paper examines global trends in gender-responsive trade policy by tracing how gender provisions in regional trade agreements (RTAs) have evolved from declaratory language towards institutionalised mechanisms and what this shift implies for domestic policy space. It assesses the recently enforced India-UK CETA's design against global benchmarks and India's own structural constraints, including export-oriented manufacturing's untapped potential to absorb female labour, capacity constraints due to the dominance of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and barriers to network and information access that keep women-led enterprises out of trade. The paper argues that enforceability is not the sole measure of a provision's strength, and that commitments calibrated to national circumstance can generate substantive obligations over time through a robust implementation practice, with India-UK CETA's Working Group as the test case for whether they do.

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Gender-Inclusive Trade Agreements for Women-led Structural Transformation in India

Tanu M. Goyal, Shravani Prakash, Ketaki Gaikwad and Keshav Sachdeva

1. Introduction

Women's full and equal participation in economic activities is increasingly recognised as a defining driver of sustainable and inclusive growth and development. A growing body of evidence shows that economies perform better when women participate fully as workers, entrepreneurs, traders, innovators, and leaders. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates suggest that the economic disempowerment of women costs South Asia the equivalent of roughly 30 per cent of regional gross domestic product (GDP), while closing gender gaps in countries where they are the widest could raise output by as much as 35 per cent.[1] Realising this potential requires addressing the constraints that continue to limit women's economic participation, including social and cultural norms, the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and structural barriers embedded in labour markets. Equally important is building an enabling ecosystem that actively invites, supports and rewards women's participation by creating positive pathways for entry and advancement. However, gender inclusion does not emerge automatically; it must be intentionally integrated into systems, institutions, laws, instruments, business practices and public policies, with mechanisms that can ensure effective implementation at scale.

Cross-border trade is one of the critical domains where gender balance remains to be achieved. Today, trade is no longer understood merely as an 'engine of economic growth' in the traditional sense; it is also recognised as a conduit for development and shared prosperity. Evidence suggests that international trade linkages also have the potential to become an engine for reducing gender gaps rather than reproducing them. For instance, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (2020) estimated that women account for around 33 per cent of the workforce in exporting firms compared with 24 per cent in non-exporting firms, and women make up 36 per cent of the workforce in firms participating in global value chains. In several countries, the share of women employed by exporting firms is even higher, underscoring the important role of trade integration in creating employment opportunities for women. Making trade gender-inclusive, therefore, is a key pillar to achieve the broader objectives of sustainable and inclusive growth and development.

This is particularly true for a country like India. Women's participation in the country's manufacturing and entrepreneurship remains well below potential, and their share in exports has yet to reflect their broader share of the workforce. While no official disaggregated

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[1] This was a 2018-19 estimate of the IMF. The report is accessible here: https://www.imf.org/en/publications/fandd/issues/2019/03/closing-the-gender-gap-dabla (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

statistics currently exist on the share of women in India's trade, women's integration into global value chains remains an unrealised goal.

It is against this backdrop that India's trade policy and its approach to free trade agreements in particular assume significance. Historically, India limited the inclusion of gender provisions in its preferential trade agreements. The India-United Kingdom (UK) Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which entered into force in July 2026, is the first Indian regional trade agreement (RTA) to incorporate a dedicated gender chapter and explicit gender-related provisions, signalling a shift, albeit a preliminary one. Notably, a gender chapter does not yet form part of India's standard negotiating template, as its inclusion appears to be a function of partner-country design choices rather than a domestic policy preference. For instance, the India-Oman Agreement, concluded after the UK deal, contains only a passing reference to gender.[2] In contrast, agreements with the UK and European Union (EU)[3] incorporate substantive gender provisions in their concluded or provisional texts, because both countries treat gender commitments as integral to their negotiating templates, applied consistently across their trading partners rather than tailored specifically to India. India's inclusion of gender provisions in trade agreements, in other words, has so far been a function of who it is negotiating with and not yet a standard it has set for itself.

This paper takes India’s shift towards gender- inclusive regional trade agreements (RTAs) as its point of departure, but not its endpoint. Rather than reading the India-UK CETA in isolation, it situates the agreement within global trends in gender-responsive trade policy. It assesses how India's approach to free trade agreements (FTAs) should evolve from here, and what it would take for trade agreements to become genuine instruments for expanding women's participation in sectors where India has a comparative advantage. In doing so, the paper examines both the substance of the gender issues that RTAs have addressed, and importantly, the design choices underpinning them, including the legal and enforcement mechanisms that determine whether such provisions translate into practice.

Section 1 lays down the global backdrop against which gender has been integrated into RTAs around the world, tracing trends in the gender issues covered and the design of legal provisions across agreements. Section 2 positions the gender inclusive RTAs, including the India-UK CETA, as potential enablers of gendered structural transformation in India. The concluding Section 3 offers reflections on the way forward on what it would take for gender-inclusive RTAs to become the norm, rather than the exception, in India's trade policy.

[2] There is a limited reference, tucked in the MSME chapter.
[3] The provisional text of the agreement is available.

2. Rationale and Global Trends in Gender-inclusive Trade Agreements

Traditional trade theory rests on the principles of competitiveness and comparative advantage. From Ricardo's (1817) comparative advantage to Heckscher-Ohlin's (1933) factor-endowment framework, the theoretical consensus has held that countries gain from specialising in and exporting goods they produce relatively efficiently. Recent trade theory demonstrates that it is the more productive and competitive firms that self-select into international markets (Melitz, 2003; Bernard and Jensen, 1999).

Empirical evidence consistently shows that firms that trade are larger, more productive, more capital- and skill-intensive, and pay higher wages than their domestically oriented counterparts (Bernard et al., 2007). If exporting firms represent the most productive segment of an economy, then increasing women's participation in such enterprises constitutes a direct channel through which women can contribute to and benefit from a country's structural transformation, understood as the reallocation of labour and resources from low-productivity to high-productivity activities (McMillan and Rodrik, 2011; Herrendorf, Rogerson and Valentinyi, 2014). In parallel, analysis suggests that expanding trade can act as an impetus for countries to boost female participation in the economy (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

Yet access to these gains remains highly gender unequal. Historically, cross-border trade has had a disproportionately negative impact on women because men and women occupy different roles in economies and societies, enjoy unequal access to resources and face distinct structural barriers. A gender-neutral trade environment is not truly neutral in its effects, as it can deepen existing inequalities even while generating aggregate gains. This is evident from the fact that globally, only 15 per cent of exporting firms are women-led (World Bank and WTO, 2020). However, trade can become a pathway to women's economic empowerment when the right policy framework is in place, as demonstrated by countries such as Morocco, Romania and Viet Nam, where women represent more than 50 per cent of the workforce of exporting firms, which have in turn created jobs for 15 per cent of the female working population in these countries (World Bank and WTO, 2020; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2025).

Therefore, there is a clear suggestion that gender-responsive trade policy can serve as a lever to enhance women's labour participation and their role in the economy's structural transformation. However, this requires lowering barriers in trade sectors where women are concentrated, along with support measures and initiatives to boost participation. This recognition has driven the need to shift from gender-neutral to gender-responsive trade policies, including institutionalising gender commitments in trade agreements.

This impetus to make trade gender-inclusive gained traction only very recently. A push from the multilateral regime came after several WTO members signed a Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment at the Buenos Aires Ministerial in 2017. Before this, gender issues were an institutional blind spot (International Trade Centre, 2020). Trade policy increasingly reflected this shift, with gender-related provisions appearing in a growing number of RTAs across the world. The forthcoming paragraphs discuss coverage of gender issues in trade agreements.

2.1 The Rationale for Gender - Inclusive Trade Agreements

The case for embedding gender provisions in RTAs rests on two pillars – economic and human rights. The economic argument holds that gender inequality undermines sustainable development and growth, while empowering women enhances productivity and long-term prosperity. The human rights argument frames gender equality as a fundamental right already recognised in international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UN Charter, and the International Bill of Human Rights, making gender provisions in FTAs a way of operationalising existing obligations rather than creating new ones (Bahri, 2025).

Trade agreements are also particularly effective instruments to accelerate gender equality because they work through "motivation", since countries are incentivised to undertake domestic reforms in exchange for market access and trade benefits. As RTAs increasingly cover regulatory issues beyond tariffs, they can encourage reforms in laws and procedures that affect women's participation in trade, employment and entrepreneurship; promote gender impact assessments across sectors and regions; and bind countries to minimum standards on non-discrimination, labour rights, access to education and health services, skill development, and women's participation in decision-making. They can further advance better working conditions, equal pay, maternity protection and flexible work arrangements through commitments directed at both governments and businesses.

Nonetheless, embedding gender norms in trade agreements requires a careful and calibrated approach. Unlike tariff concessions, the non-tariff enablers through which gender objectives are typically pursued, such as labour standards, workplace regulations, procurement rules and support frameworks for women-owned/dominated enterprises, fall squarely within the domain of domestic regulatory policy. In cases where trading partners occupy markedly different positions on the development trajectory, regulatory commitments calibrated to the institutional and enterprise capacities of advanced economies may not translate into desired outcomes. Rather, it may impose disproportionate compliance burdens on MSME-dominated economies, constraining precisely the policy flexibility that late-developing countries require to sequence gender-responsive reforms in a manner that would yield desired results effectively. Thus, while the case for gender-responsive trade agreements is well established in principle, in practice, the effectiveness lies in the design and its implementation.

2.2 Inclusion of Gender-Norms in Trade Agreements: Checking the Gender Box

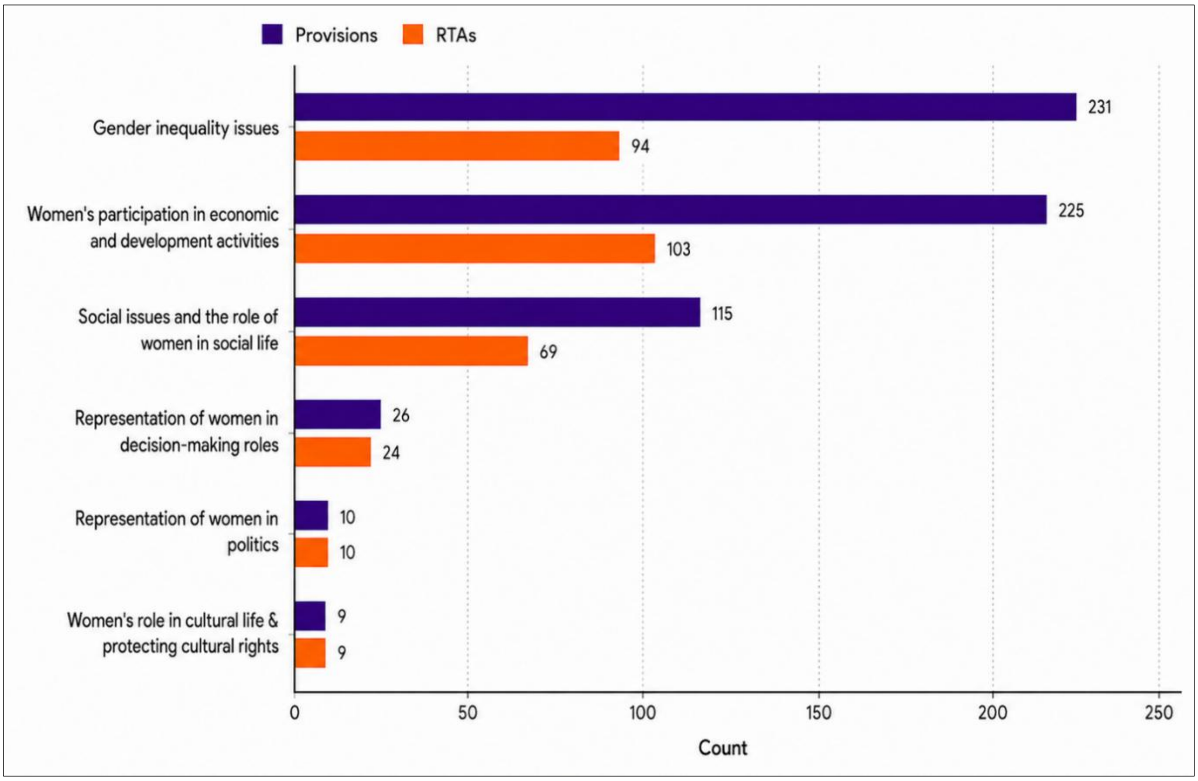
Beyond their conventional market access provisions, trade agreements increasingly embed explicit commitments on gender equality. The WTO's Database on Gender Provisions[4] in RTAs currently provides the most complete map of gender inclusion in trade agreements. It captures every explicit reference to gender, sex, women or girls across agreements worldwide, including those signed but not yet in force, and links each provision to the international frameworks it draws from, including CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment, and Sustainable Development Goal number 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the database's coverage currently extends only to RTAs up to 2022. The current paper updates that data by additionally examining gender provisions in RTAs that entered into force after 2022. The analysis builds on the findings of the WTO Secretariat (2022), which assessed the gender provisions in RTAs included in the database on gender inclusive trade agreements.

The headline numbers are strikingly large, but they lack depth. As of August 2026, 112 of the 386 (nearly one in three) RTAs in force contain explicit gender references. Seventeen of these agreements include chapters fully dedicated to gender and trade. Over 150 countries, virtually all of them WTO members, have signed at least one trade agreement with gender-related provisions. On the surface, while this absolute number looks promising, the headline counts say very little on their own and do not articulate much about the depth of these considerations. Three questions that matter more are *what* these provisions actually cover, *how* they are written and if there is an institutional mechanism supporting them.

A keyword analysis, the most fundamental method to capture coverage (Monteiro, 2018; Monterio 2021), **shows that "gender inequality" as an overall issue appears in the largest number of RTAs, with 231 provisions across 94 RTAs.** Under specific gender issues, "women's participation in economic and development activities" has been covered under 225 provisions across 103 RTAs. Social issues and the role of women in social life, including topics such as education, health and family policies, have been covered in 115 provisions across 69 RTAs (see Figure 1).

[4] For details see: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/gender_responsive_trade_agreement_db_e.htm (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

Figure 1: Gender issues addressed in RTAs

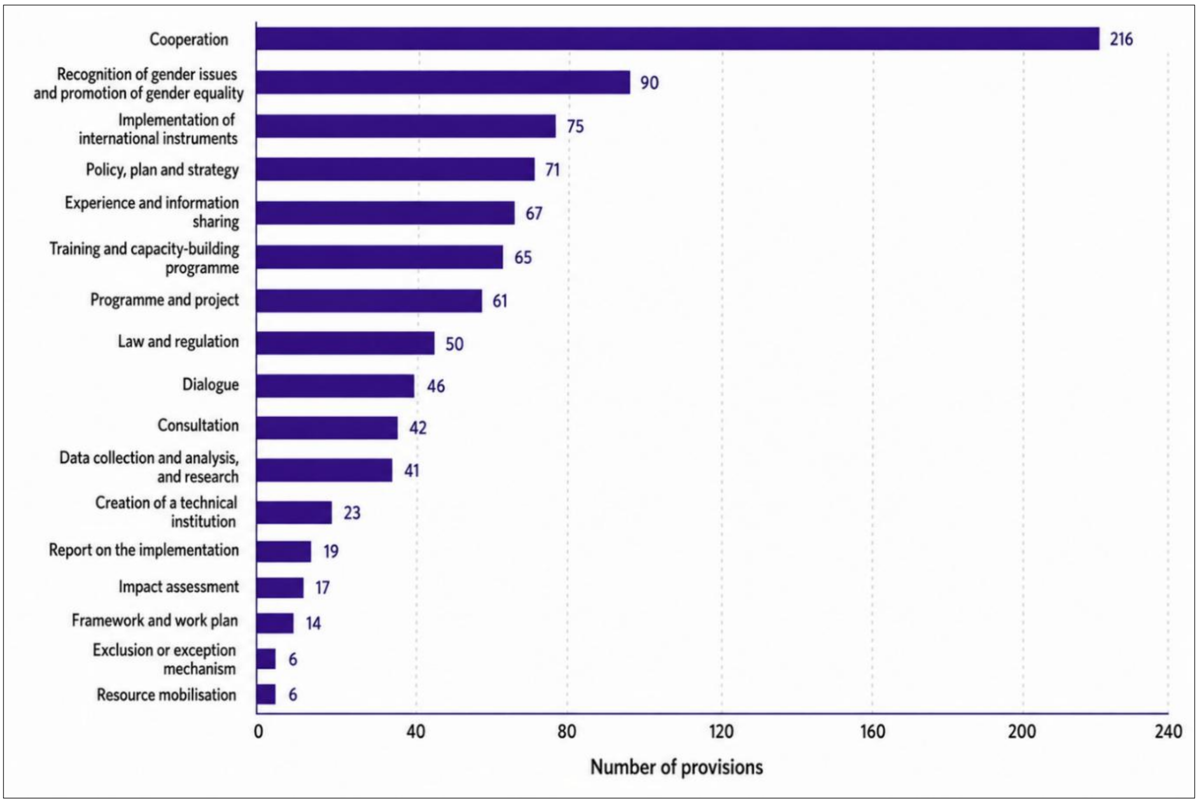


Source: WTO Database on Gender Provisions in Regional Trade Agreements (till Sept 2022) and Authors' calculations for agreements coming into force after September 2022 to August 2026.

In comparison, the inclusion of issues like the representation of women in decision-making roles, including women in politics, has been minimal. These are areas where the gap matters most for women-led development. Representation in decision-making roles, including in trade negotiation, export promotion bodies and economic policy institutions, is the dimension that determines whether women shape trade policy or simply absorb its effects. The thin coverage of these aspects suggests that gender is being broadly treated as a labour-market issue more than a structural economic constraint and an overall governance issue.

The deeper question is how strongly implementation and enforcement mechanisms are built around the gender provisions. By far, the most common implementation instrument in gender provisions to date has been "co-operation", which appears 216 times in RTAs that have gender provisions. This is more than twice as much as any other instrument used to address gender issues in RTAs. Recognition of gender issues and promotion of gender equality (90), implementation of international instruments (75), policy, plan and strategy (72), experience and information sharing (68), training and capacity-building programme (66), and programme and project (61) are the other major instruments used (See Figure 2). While these instruments are useful, most of them do not create a binding obligation that a state can be held to.

Figure 2: Implementation instruments used to address gender issues in RTAs, by number of provisions



Source: WTO Database on Gender Provisions in Regional Trade Agreements (till Sept 2022) and Authors' calculations for agreements coming into force after September 2022 to August 2026

The pattern is consistent, as most gender provisions are written in a language that *encourages* rather than *requires*. In some cases, it is with an oversight mechanism. Oversight typically sits with committees and groups that largely include representation from the contracting parties. And a substantial number of provisions sit outside third-party dispute settlement mechanisms, implying that even countries that have far-reaching gender provisions, are not legally enforceable in the way substantive commitments like tariff commitments are.

This reflects the underlying structure of trade negotiation. Tariff schedules, rules of origin, and investment protection are routinely backed by hard law because trade negotiators treat these as the core commitments of an agreement. Gender provisions, on the other hand, have so far occupied a different space, included as a *recognised policy concern* but *being implemented primarily through co-operation and dialogue rather than as a binding obligation*. The next few paragraphs dwell deeper into the architectural design of the gender provisions, especially when they are embedded in separate chapters and what this implies for enabling women's participation.

2.3 Architectural Elements of FTAs with Dedicated Gender and Related Chapters

A standalone gender chapter, by its nature, should extend well beyond declaratory affirmations. The prevailing pattern in some recently signed RTAs bears this out, with most agreements featuring dedicated gender chapters (Table 1). These chapters deal with a wide spectrum of issues, including establishing treaty practice or an endogenous governance mechanism that oversees the application of the expectation and pathway set out in the agreement. This is a significant innovation in bilateral agreements covering areas where established international trade law or multilateral jurisprudence is absent. Only a small number, remain limited to recognising women's role in socio-economic development and business, without charting a strong pathway for the future.[5]

Table 1: In-force FTAs with dedicated Gender Chapters (as of August 2026)

S. No.	Agreement	Signed	Chapter
1	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Treaty	1993	Chapter 24: Women in Development and Business (1993 – first ever)
2	East African Community (EAC) Treaty	1999	Chapter 22: Enhancing the Role of Women in Socio-Economic Development (1999)
3	Chile–Uruguay Economic Complementation Trade Agreement (ACE)	2016	Chapter 14: Género y Comercio
4	Argentina–Chile FTA	2017	Chapter 15: Gender and Trade
5	Canada–Chile FTA	2017	Chapter N bis: Trade and Gender
6	Brazil–Chile FTA	2018	Chapter 18: Comercio y Género
7	Canada–Israel FTA	2018	Chapter 13: Trade and Gender
8	Chile–Ecuador ACE No. 75	2020	Chapter 18: Comercio y Género
9	UK–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)	2021	Chapter 21: Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment
10	UK–Australia FTA	2021	Chapter 24: Trade and Gender Equality
11	New Zealand–UK FTA	2022	Chapter 25 (Trade & Gender Equality) + Art. 23.8
12	UK–Iceland/ Liechtenstein/Norway FTA	2021	Chapter 13, Section 13.3: Women's Economic Empowerment
13	Chile–Paraguay FTA	2021	Chapter 13: Comercio y Género
14	Pacific Alliance–Singapore FTA	2022	Chapter 17: Trade and Gender
15	Canada–Ukraine FTA	2024	Chapter 23
16	EU–Chile Advanced Framework Agreement	2002	Chapter 27 (Trade & Gender Equality)
17	Australia–UAE CEPA	2024	Chapter 19 (Trade, Gender Balance & Women's Economic Empowerment)
18	India-UK CETA	2025	Chapter 23 (Trade & Gender Equality)

Source: WTO RTA Database and WTO Database on Gender Provisions in RTAs

[5] For instance, the chapters including Common Market for Eastern and South Africa signed in 1993 and Eastern African Community Treaty signed in 1999.

Most agreements containing a stand-alone gender chapter, including the India–UK CETA, provide for the establishment of committees, sub-committees, or working groups to institutionalise the chapter's operation, but these committees possess no adjudicative or enforcement authority. The mandate of these committees and working groups is typically confined to soft functions including deliberation and agenda-setting, delivery of co-operation activities, monitoring and review of the chapter and of gender-relevant provisions elsewhere in the agreement, and co-ordination with other treaty bodies and stakeholder consultation, including with women workers, entrepreneurs, and marginalised groups. A subset of agreements, most notably Chile's, goes further by providing for state-to-state consultations to resolve questions concerning the interpretation or application of the chapter. Such consultation provisions occupy an intermediate position on the spectrum between best-endeavour language and binding, ad judicable obligation, a calibrated design for commitments that parties wish to operationalise incrementally and by consent rather than subject to compulsory enforcement.

Such mechanisms are particularly valuable where the enterprise landscape is dominated by MSMEs, as in India. Enforceable provisions presuppose firms with a certain degree of legal and operational sophistication and the resources to invoke them. This presumption holds for micro and small enterprises that are often concentrated at the informal end of the spectrum or have barely formalised. Committee-based structures invert this logic by delivering co-operation activities, which are embedded in their terms of reference, such as capacity building, market information and trade facilitation support. These function as institutional handholding for enterprises that would otherwise be unable to access the agreement's benefits at all, while stakeholder-engagement provisions give women entrepreneurs a direct channel to treaty bodies without the intermediation costs of formal dispute mechanisms. In such contexts, the soft architecture is not a diluted substitute for enforcement but arguably the more relevant instrument. The binding constraint for an MSME-dominated economy is not whether obligations can be enforced, but rather whether firms can be brought to the point of using the agreement in the first place. Such endogenous structures act as a bridge for these firms.

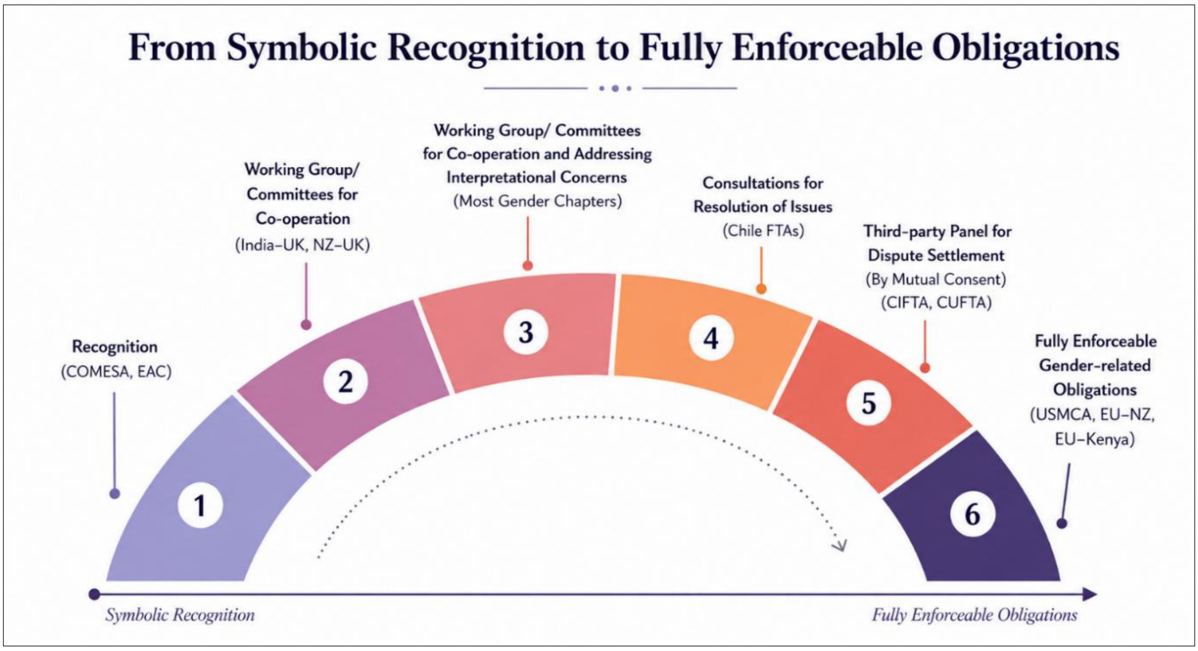
Having said that, it is worth mentioning that a few agreements, notably the Canada-Israel FTA (CIFTA) signed in 2018, and the Canada-Ukraine FTA (CUFTA) signed in 2023, have extended the scope of the third-party dispute settlement mechanism (DSM) to the gender chapter. While the dispute settlement chapter by itself carves out the gender chapter from its scope, the gender chapter explicitly permits consensual recourse to panel procedures, making it one of the few trade-and-gender chapters with a contingent pathway to third-party adjudication, though one that has never been invoked. The modernised Canada-Ukraine Agreement permits recourse to third-party panel dispute settlement for the gender chapter, but only by mutual consent after dialogue and consultation have failed, which is the same opt-in model as CIFTA, achieved through slightly different drafting (there is no carve-out from the DSM chapter).

The modernised EU-Chile Agreement also has provisions for dispute settlement, but these are slightly different from those in the Canadian FTAs. The gender chapter of the EU-Chile Agreement is integrated into the Trade and Sustainable Development enforcement track, under which either Party may unilaterally trigger time-bound consultations and, failing resolution, can seek redressal from an independent panel of experts, which is designed to include representation from both parties and panellists drawn from party-proposed sub-lists but serve independently. This way, the design is akin to an exogenous, third-party dispute settlement mechanism. Moreover, unlike the Canadian FTAs discussed earlier, the third-party adjudication does not depend on consent by either party, making it a stronger mechanism in practice.

Often gender provisions are also covered in other chapters, particularly in the EU and US agreements. In the EU agreements, gender provisions are often covered through the trade and sustainable development chapter; in the US agreements, they are covered through the chapter on trade-related aspects of labour (North American and some Latin American FTAs) through the provision on gender equality and the non-discrimination clause. The strongest example is the recent EU agreement with New Zealand, which has gender provisions built into the chapter on trade and sustainable development, allowing recourse to a formal dispute settlement mechanism. Similarly, the EU-Kenya EPA signed in 2023 follows a similar approach, embedding gender equality provisions within its trade and sustainable development part. More broadly, virtually all EU trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters, including those with South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and Japan, incorporate gender indirectly by obliging the parties to respect the ILO fundamental conventions, which include C100 (Equal Remuneration, 1951) and C111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, 1958).

Often, coverage through the labour chapter makes the provisions stronger, due to the applicability of ILO conventions. For instance, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) has provisions against gender-based discrimination in the labour chapter. Specifically, it commits members to implementing policies that protect workers against employment discrimination on grounds including sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity and caregiving responsibilities, thereby giving it a broader scope. It also covers issues like wage discrimination, leave provisions and accommodation practices. The provisions are subject to a dispute settlement mechanism, including adjudication by a panel of experts that may include a third party.

Figure 3: Spectrum of Gender Provisions in Trade Agreements



Source: Authors' analysis based on the texts of the trade agreements cited

3. RTAs as Enablers of Women-led Structural Transformation in India

India's structural transformation has largely bypassed the manufacturing sector. Unlike most successful industrialising economies, India has followed a services-led growth path, with manufacturing's share of gross value added remaining virtually unchanged at around 17 per cent over the past decade (Goyal, Fernandez, et al, 2025). While the economy has expanded rapidly, employment growth in manufacturing has remained weak for both women and men, limiting the shift of workers into higher-productivity, tradable activities.

This gap is particularly evident in India's female labour market. Although the number of women in the labour force has nearly doubled from 104 million in 2017–18 to 201 million in 2025 (PLFS 2025-26)[6] the gains have been driven overwhelmingly by rural self-employment and agriculture rather than manufacturing. Only around 12 per cent of working women are employed in manufacturing, with women accounting for just one-fifth of formal manufacturing employment, a share that has remained largely stagnant. Women's employment in manufacturing is also highly concentrated in a narrow set of low- and medium-technology industries, particularly textiles, apparel and food processing, with limited participation in higher-value manufacturing activities (Goyal, Fernandez, et al, 2025). Rising female labour force participation, therefore, has not translated into the kind of structural transformation associated with productivity growth, quality employment and export competitiveness.

[6] For details see: https://www.mospi.gov.in/uploads/publications_reports/publications_reports1773656472984_10b322bc-a45a-46b6-adda-210a101d6c2d_Monthly_Bulletin_february_2026.pdf (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

Accelerating manufacturing growth remains central to India's development ambitions. In 2025, India crossed the USD 4 trillion GDP mark, growing at 7.6 per cent, with a projected growth rate of 6.5 per cent for both 2026 and 2027.[7] Yet its per capita income trails behind that of many developing nations, highlighting the scope to accelerate growth by increasing women's economic participation, which currently accounts for only 18 per cent of GDP.[8] With exports targeted to reach USD 1 trillion in 2026 and USD 2 trillion within the next five years,[9] expanding trade and productive capacity will be critical to India's ambition of becoming a USD 5 trillion economy by 2027 and a developed "Viksit Bharat" by 2047. Achieving these ambitions will also require narrowing the gender gap in employment, as estimates suggest that bringing an additional 400 million women into employment could add USD 14 trillion to the Indian economy by 2047 (Sheth et al, 2024).

This is especially important because export-oriented industries in India, like textiles and garments, employ a large chunk of the non-agricultural female workforce. In fact, Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) 2023-24 data show that all exporting firms in the manufacturing sector employ a greater share of women in their workforce and have lower gender wage gaps (Table 2). A survey-based study found that as export-oriented firms expand their business, they tend to hire more production workers, largely women, even though in the case of MSMEs, these hirings are on a contractual or piece-rate basis (Goyal, Puri, et al, 2025). Export-oriented industries, therefore, are much more gender inclusive and, hence, are crucial to expanding women's workforce participation in India. Expanding women's access to a more diversified range of export-oriented manufacturing industries will be critical for achieving both inclusive growth and genuine structural transformation, not only by increasing their numbers but also broadening their representation across industries.

Table 2: Share of Female Workers in Manufacturing Firms by Export Status

Industry	Non-exporting Firms	Exporting Firms	Overall
Manufacturing (All Firms)	17.1%	25.6%	18.6%
Textiles	18.3%	26.2%	19.7%
Wearing Apparel	46.7%	47.9%	47.1%
Leather and Leather Products	32.9%	45.1%	36.4%

Source: ASI 2023-24

Note: The share of female workers is calculated as the number of female employees divided by the total number of employees. All variables calculated are taken only for 'directly employed', excluding people employed through contractors, supervisory staff, managerial staff, etc. This is the only employee category in ASI that has a gender disaggregation.

7 IMF's World Economic Outlook Update for April 2026, accessible at https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/weo/2026/april/english/text.pdf (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

8 For details see: https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-03/From-Borrowers-to-Builders-Women%E2%80%99s-role-in-India%27s-financial-growth-story.pdf (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

9 For details see: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2262262&reg=3&lang=1 (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

Examples of Vietnam and Bangladesh show how export-oriented manufacturing can be built on women's productive absorption. In Bangladesh, ready-made garments grew from roughly 4 per cent of exports in 1983 to nearly 80 per cent, pulling large numbers of women into the workforce, suggesting that labour-intensive export growth, paired with tariff rationalisation, can become a viable route to raising India's female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) (Sabharwal and Gupta, 2026). Vietnam's export-oriented manufacturing, concentrated in sectors like garments, footwear and electronics, and drawing overwhelmingly on female labour, expanded rapidly following the tariff reduction after the 2001 United States-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (Melitz, 2003).

For India, however, realising the potential for women-led export growth will require addressing the factors that keep women shut out of trade in the first place. Assessments point to four broad categories of barriers (UNDP, 2016): *productive and financial capacity* – insufficient production capacity, lack of price competitiveness in export markets, and inability to meet working capital requirements for large orders; *networks and relationships* – difficulty identifying foreign partners, limited peer networks among women entrepreneurs, and challenges retaining skilled workers; *information* – a lack of clarity on market entry, procedures, incentives and export processes, and *mobility* - safety and security issues that affect women's ability to travel to distant cities or overseas for trade fairs or buyer – seller meets.

Gender - inclusive FTAs offer a natural bilateral mechanism to address these constraints directly through gender chapters that build capacity, provide information and offer network support. But their role is dual – beyond addressing supply-side barriers, they can also shape the sectoral composition of trade itself to expand demand for women's labour. Designed with both functions in mind, gender - inclusive FTAs could become a significant enabler of women's export capabilities in India, which is what makes the India-UK CETA's gender chapter, discussed next, a notable point of departure.

4. The India-UK CETA: A Landmark in India's Trade and Gender Policy

India's engagement with gender in trade agreements has been gradual, marked with caution. Promoting women-led MSMEs and start-ups has been acknowledged in the India-UAE CEPA, the India-New Zealand FTA, and the India-Oman CEPA, while the India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) and India-EU FTA have incorporated gender provisions within their Trade and Sustainable Development chapters. The India-UK CETA[10] marks a clear step beyond these precedents. As one of the most detailed and comprehensive FTAs India has signed to date, covering several "WTO-plus" issues for the first time,[11] its integration of gender considerations across multiple chapters, alongside a standalone chapter

[10] For details see: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/comprehensive-economic-and-trade-agreement-between-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-india (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

[11] For details see: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/trade/exports/insights/bridging-trade-and-gender-how-the-india-uk-fta-advances-gender-equality/articleshow/122990100.cms?from=mdr (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

on gender equality,[12] is a landmark development for India's trade policy. Given the depth of India's existing trade ties with the UK, the agreement's tariff reductions are expected to boost Indian exports while reinforcing the adoption of the gender-inclusive practices it sets out.

Figure 4: Overview of Gender-Related Provisions in the India–UK CETA

Crucially, the India-UK CETA is the first Indian FTA to move beyond mere acknowledgements of women's contribution to the economy. It is the UK's fifth trade agreement to include dedicated gender provisions (Box 1), and the first to do so with an emerging-market economy. The India–UK CETA also builds on the approach developed across the UK's previous four gender-inclusive agreements with New Zealand, Japan, Australia, and the Norway–Iceland–Liechtenstein bloc, reflecting a growing and increasingly institutionalised approach to integrating gender considerations into trade policy. By embedding gender equality into its core, the agreement could transform the narrative of women from being passive beneficiaries of trade into active participants and leaders within global value chains. As India's first agreement featuring a dedicated and comprehensive chapter on Trade and Gender Equality, the India-UK CETA highlights the need for such systemic action by acknowledging both the contributions of women and the barriers they face, as well as set out a pathway for achieving equal participation of women in the workforce. The labour chapter also contains detailed provisions promoting non-discrimination and gender equality in the workplace. Gender and equality considerations are also embedded across other chapters, such as those on trade and

[12] For details see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/687e5e5492957f2ec567c61b/uk_india_ceta_chapter_23_trade_and_gender_equality.pdf (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

development co-operation, government procurement and digital trade, to support women's inclusion in these domains. The agreement encourages national standard-setting bodies to adopt gender-responsive standards and processes. Within the digital trade chapter, the parties commit to exchanging experiences and best practices for creating datasets and conducting gender-specific analysis related to digital policies.

If implemented effectively, these provisions could bring significant benefits. One of the most tangible ways the India-UK FTA could empower women is through significant tariff reductions and duty-free access in sectors such as textiles, apparel, leather and footwear. These sectors, which employ a large share of women in manufacturing, are classified as 'Category A' in the UK's schedule of Commitments, implying that the UK has committed to eliminating all customs duties on these items from the date the agreement takes effect. Consequently, UK imports from India in these sectors are projected to rise by 85.9 per cent compared to a no-FTA scenario.[13] These gains could represent thousands of new jobs and more secure livelihoods for Indian women. Research by EXIM Bank shows that in India, a 1 per cent tariff reduction in female-intensive export sectors can increase the female labour supply by 0.36 per cent and add 0.13 per cent to GDP.[14]

The agreement's gender provisions also carry implications for how firms operate. Companies seeking to benefit from tariff concessions will be expected to follow fair and inclusive hiring practices. Such FTA-aligned sourcing requirements by UK-based companies could catalyse India's export-oriented firms to introduce initiatives to reduce wage discrimination, undertake skill building, incentivise female leadership, and ensure workplace safety and security. This is not to suggest that this is the only path to achieving gender balance or that no other efforts are underway. However, certain gender-based disparities are so deeply rooted in our systems that they demand an extra push to effectively address and overcome them. Shahi Exports, India's largest garment exporter, for instance, illustrates this potential. Field visits revealed that roughly 70 per cent of the workforce is female, a composition shaped in part by multinational sourcing initiatives, including those involving UK buyers, focused on recruitment, promotion, wage equalisation and upskilling. (Goyal, Fernandez, et al, 2025). The India-UK CETA's gender provisions are positioned to accelerate such initiatives further.

That said, without careful, intentional policy design and complementary domestic reforms, trade liberalisation often perpetuates existing inequalities. Ensuring India benefits from this FTA and, more broadly, from gender - inclusive FTAs requires deliberate attention to implementation. As the UK's first agreement with a dedicated gender chapter with an emerging market economy, the design of the agreement is, therefore, reflective of the enterprise landscape in India, which is dominated by micro enterprises. The India-UK CETA adopts a notably stronger approach, as it establishes a treaty body dedicated specifically to

[13] For details see: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmbeis/996/report.html#heading-14 (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

[14] For details see: https://www.eximbankindia.in/node/231 (last accessed on August 21, 2026)

advancing trade and gender equality, created at the time of signing rather than deferred to a future date. As discussed earlier, treaty bodies of this kind function as endogenous governance mechanisms (formed jointly by representatives of both parties) in contrast to exogenous mechanisms that rely on a third party. While treaty bodies are not without limitations, they offer a markedly more effective architecture than agreements that articulate intentions while designating no entity responsible for monitoring implementation. This structural advantage is arguably greatest precisely where domestic policy and enterprise landscape is evolving, since a standing mechanism can supply the monitoring and iterative dialogue while helping to build enterprise and institutional capacity to support the transition towards a gender-inclusive future of work.

Under the India-UK CETA, this has taken the form of a Working Group on Trade and Gender Equality. However, this needs to be supported by an institutional architecture and national strategy. The Working Group comprises government representatives from both sides, tasked with advancing women's economic empowerment and gender equality across the agreement. The Working Group will support the effective implementation and operation of the gender chapter and report to a higher joint committee also established under the agreement**.** While they mark a promising step forward, the true impact of such mechanisms will depend on how well they are implemented, the consistency of stakeholder engagement and the adoption of a comprehensive, goal-oriented approach. Equally important is evaluation, ensuring that what has been agreed on paper is actually used, regularly reviewed and delivers real results for women in trade. A national strategy on building a gender-inclusive manufacturing sector may serve a stronger purpose.

Box 1: The UK's Approach to Gender in FTAs – Design, Uptake, and Practice

Of the UK's 39 free trade agreements in force, four contain dedicated gender provisions – three structured as standalone chapters on trade and gender equality (Trade and Gender Equality Chapters with Australia and New Zealand, and Women's Economic Empowerment in Trade Chapter in the UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)), and one embedding gender within a Sustainable Development chapter (with Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein).

According to the UK’s Department for Business and Trade, the UK structures its gender chapters around four reinforcing elements:[15]

- **Signalling** – reflecting the shared priorities and overarching objectives of both parties
- **Thematic Weaving** – embedding gender-specific provisions throughout the agreement to maximise impact

[15] For details see: https://www.wto.org/library/events/event_resources/women_0207202510/860_2607.pdf (last accessed on August 18, 2026)

- **Co-operation** – encouraging joint initiatives, knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices
- **Institutional Mechanisms** – establishing a framework for co-ordination, co-operation, and monitoring progress over time.

The gender chapters promote co-operation on data sharing and financial inclusion, support women-led businesses, and establish working groups, dialogues and reporting structures across entrepreneurship, digital participation, labour equality and regulatory transparency. Alongside the standalone chapter, the UK also weaves gender provisions into other parts of its FTAs, particularly chapters covering areas where women face known barriers, such as services, digital trade, SMEs and procurement. This keeps the commitments targeted and directly trade-related, rather than confined to a single chapter that operates in isolation.

To support uptake and FTA utilisation by women, the UK complements the gendered FTA design by focusing on raising awareness of the opportunities presented by the FTAs, equipping businesses with the tools and knowledge to use them, providing practical support through great.gov.uk, and gathering business feedback during implementation to ensure that women-led businesses can use the provisions.

In terms of implementation in practice, the UK-Japan CEPA offers the most developed example of how a gender chapter can translate into sustained activity. UK hosted a bilateral seminar in July 2024 and Japan in February 2025, alongside "Women in Exports" roundtables and ongoing exchange of information on programmes and initiatives. Similar activities under the UK-New Zealand FTA included joint work on gender-disaggregated data frameworks, a structured work plan for future co-operation, and a June 2024 networking event, pairing a New Zealand trade mission of women business leaders with their UK counterparts.

5. Recommendations for enabling Women-led Structural Transformation in India through Gender-Inclusive Trade Agreements

The integration of gender into trade frameworks reflects a growing recognition that economic growth is unsustainable without inclusion. But the data makes it clear that inclusion is not the same as impact. Gender language has spread widely across trade agreements, but the systems to make that language work have not kept up. To turn commitments into outcomes, gender provisions need to move from soft language to enforceable obligations backed by resources and monitoring, and from a narrow focus on just labour markets to representation in the institutions that shape trade policy itself.

The preceding discussion shows that, globally, gender provisions in trade agreements have evolved incrementally, both spatially and in their depth. While they still remain sparse in coverage, with a few countries and issues being covered, they are progressively becoming deeper in design. What began as normative text without jurisprudence has settled into a systematic preference for endogenous governance and soft-law instruments. These provisions in bilateral and preferential agreements have paved the way for deeper commitments. Recent agreements reflect increasingly robust commitments, with a progression from declaratory recognition to institutionalised committees and consultation mechanisms, followed by consent-based access to panels and, ultimately, mandatory expert adjudication. To some extent, it also exhibits geographical preferences, with the EU being firmer on a certain design while Chile is more persistent in including gender issues. Each generation of texts builds on the treaty practice of the last, suggesting that the prevailing soft architecture is best read as deliberate sequencing and gradual accumulation of institutional experience, gender-disaggregated evidence and shared interpretation on which enforceable obligations may eventually rest.

For India, which has entered this landscape through the India-UK CETA, the relevant design question is not whether to accept enforcement, which no agreement so far imposes meaningfully, but how to make effective use of the endogenous machinery on offer. For an economy dominated by MSMEs and marked by substantial informality, the committee-and-co-operation model is not the weaker alternative but, in the present landscape, the more practical, outcome-oriented operating framework if implemented well. Its value will be measured not in disputes won, but in whether women-led enterprises are brought to the point of using the agreement at all and in whether the treaty practice India helps generate comes to shape standards it may one day be asked to accept as binding law.

For the India-UK CETA to be a genuine game changer, implementation on the ground will be critical. India can benefit from drawing from the experience of the UK's four previous gender-inclusive FTAs (Box 1), particularly in translating institutional commitments into practical outcomes. The following measures, for instance, could help ensure the India-UK CETA delivers tangible benefits for women:

- **Moving from provisions to establishing well-functioning institutional mechanisms:** While provisions to establish a dedicated working group with a defined mandate have been established under the India-UK CETA's gender chapter, it must transform into an effective dialogue mechanism with a regular meeting schedule, as modelled on the structures the UK has built into its Australia, New Zealand, and Japan agreements. The choice of committee members matters, and ensuring diversity while making selections (state-level representation, non-state players and experts, women in business and other ecosystem players) to work with policymakers is needed to ensure effective implementation. A joint reporting and monitoring process must also be set up so that implementation is not left to voluntary follow-up, but is tracked and reviewed on a fixed schedule.
- **Building awareness and utilising support for women-led businesses:** It will be important to create a UK-specific outreach programme (comparable to the UK's business.gov.uk) to

inform women entrepreneurs about what the India-UK CETA actually offers them and how to access it. Export promotion bodies will have to be equipped with dedicated toolkits or advisory services to help women-led enterprises understand and use India-UK CETA provisions in practice. Moreover, a feedback loop will have to be built with women-owned businesses during implementation to identify where the agreement is or is not delivering, and adjust accordingly.

- **Investing in gender-disaggregated data infrastructure**: A joint UK-India work plan on gender-disaggregated trade data will have to be prioritised, an area where India has well-documented gaps and where the UK-New Zealand FTA already offers a template. Further, this can be used as an opportunity to build India's own statistical base on women's participation in exports.

- **Translating provisions into sustained activity and regular engagements with the right stakeholder groups:** Recurring events will need to be institutionalised, including bilateral seminars, "Women in Exports"-style roundtables, and trade missions pairing Indian women business leaders with UK counterparts, similar to the events under the UK-Japan CEPA. Trade missions must be used as genuine networking events specifically to help Indian women entrepreneurs build the foreign business networks and partnerships that they currently lack.

- **Targeting financial inclusion and addressing capacity constraints directly:** The co-operation provisions in the gender chapter could be utilised to address the working capital and productive capacity barriers for India’s women entrepreneurs by linking the co-operation mechanisms to trade finance instruments or blended finance facilities for women exporters and women-led MSMEs.

- **Documenting and disseminating success stories:** Over time, it will be important to systematically document and disseminate successful examples of export-oriented MSMEs that have increased women’s participation, employment or advancement through engagement with UK-based importers. These case studies can capture the specific changes in sourcing relationships, workplace practices, skills, or market access that contributed to these outcomes. Beyond demonstrating the value of the India-UK CETA, such evidence can provide practical models for other MSMEs, help identify what works in translating trade opportunities into gains for women, and build an evidence base to inform the future evolution of gender provisions in India’s trade agreements.

Thereafter, India must embrace the India-UK CETA as a replicable blueprint for future negotiations rather than as a one-off achievement. At a moment when closing the gender gap in the workforce has become inseparable from the ambition of becoming a developed India - a “Viksit Bharat”- trade agreements can be an effective tool for moving beyond women-led development to women-led structural transformation. Gender-inclusive FTAs can channel women’s growing workforce participation towards productive, internationally competitive and higher-value employment, the kind that structural transformation requires, rather than the low-productivity absorption that has characterised much of women's labour force growth to date. This could be treated as the key objective of signing trade agreements with legally enforceable gender provisions - to use trade policy as a lever for advancing gender equity in workforce participation and strengthening women’s contribution to the country’s structural transformation.

Finally, the position of a gender chapter along the enforceability spectrum should not, in itself, be treated as a proxy for its quality. The typology set out in Figure 3 of the paper arranges gender provisions in trade agreements along a continuum of enforceability, from declaratory recognition at one end to fully justiciable obligation at the other. Enforceability is a design variable whose value is contingent upon the structure of the economy to which it applies. Where export production is concentrated in large, formally registered firms with the administrative capacity to document compliance, binding obligation and dispute settlement plausibly generate the intended behavioural response. In India, however, the sectors employing the largest numbers of women are dominated by micro, small and medium enterprises operating substantially outside formal regulatory reach. In this context, an institutionally appropriate point of entry may be one that permits the progressive specification of obligation through practice. This defence of a soft architecture is, nonetheless, conditional on its functioning. A working group that includes relevant and diverse stakeholders, convenes regularly, produces records, and generates interpretative output, lends legitimacy to arrangements. The objective, therefore, should not be just to favour either hard or soft architecture, but to ensure that the institutional design is capable of translating gender commitments into meaningful changes in Indian women’s participation in and gains from international trade.

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