

WTO Public Forum 2021: Building Resilience to Bridge Trade Gaps through Digital Transformation

Session Title: Building Resilience to Bridge Trade Gaps through Digital Transformation

Session subtheme: Enhancing Resilience beyond COVID-19

Session type: Working Session

Name of organization: Organisation of Women in Trade United Kingdom, OWIT UK , Women's Economic Imperative International NGO, WEI USA/UK

Country where Organization is based: United Kingdom

Type of Entity: NGO

Organization Web address: <https://owituk.org/>

Person(s) in charge of organizing the session:

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Title: Associate Professor. Head, International Business and Strategy subject group/Global Lead: Trade & Investment Policy at Women's Economic Imperative (WEI)
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1

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Participation in the Public Forum:

Organized a Session: None

Participated: 2019

Session description:

Prior to the pandemic, studies showed that businesses which trade internationally are more productive than their domestically focused competitors. However, women-owned businesses are less likely to operate across borders than those owned by men. Most Women-owned businesses are micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). As a result, they often face higher costs to overcome trade and cultural barriers, and access international markets. They also suffer from limited access to STEAM education and digital skills, trade finance and contractual support. The playing field for women in international trade was already unequal prior to the COVID-19 crisis. While digital trade and e-commerce have helped to mitigate some of the barriers to trade and the negative impact of the Pandemic crisis, the ensuing disruptions in supply chains and trade links left women vulnerable to losing ground and a sizeable share of the economic gains they have made in the past. The broader impact of international trade restrictions and supply chain shifts is particularly acute in developing economies and within certain sectors such as textiles and garments, hospitality, etc. Given the added risks to women from the impact of COVID-19 compound existing inequities on trade, it is even more important to build resilience and bridge the gaps that hinder growth, making sure it is not only faster, but more sustainable and inclusive too.

The UK led the G7 Trade Track of the G7 Trade Ministerial 2021 meeting where digital trade was a priority area amplifying the digital and technology imperative to build back better to ensure that global digital markets are open for entrepreneurialism and innovation to thrive. Digital trade provides not only expanded markets through e-commerce but using fintech and digital payments enables businesses to realize efficiencies and reducing costs for small businesses seeking to export to new markets.

The ICC indicates that ‘despite more than two decades of trade digitisation efforts, data issued late last year showed that only 0.1% of bills of lading are issued electronically.’ McKinsey Global Institute estimates that around 50% of the world’s traded services are in digital form, while e-commerce accounts for around one-sixth of all goods traded across borders.

In this new world of digital trade women businesses must all employ e-commerce, which will only be beneficial and effective if these **entrepreneurs** have adequate technical capacities and value-added connectivity **capabilities such as blockchain**. As shared by WTO Chair Dr. Amrita Bahri, ‘Blockchain can help micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), more than 30 per cent of which are owned by women, to overcome costs associated with exporting and importing, and interact easily with consumers, other businesses engaged in the supply chain. However given the current digital capacities faced by women business suppliers of digital goods and services there is more to be done to access and optimize these gains.

Gender equality requires greater investment in STEAM education, digital transformation, enterprise skills, support systems, signposting and other infrastructure. For women to fully benefit from trade, they need to have better access to education, financial resources and digital technology. This is where

WTO Public Forum 2021 - OWIT UK

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collaboration between government and private sector is required. There are already cases where organisations, retailers, brands and suppliers have adopted voluntary gender-related initiatives to promote women's access to the supply chain, to training for skills development, health services, maternity benefits, leadership and financial management. In our working session we bring together expert representatives from the UK Government, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations and trade experts to examine the opportunity, what can be achieved and how initiatives are underway to equip women businesses with an enabling environment for trade, and to share possible collaborative solutions between government and private sector. These discussions will put forward suggestions that ensure the broadest range of opportunities remain open to all women businesses to acquire digital skills, build resilience and ensure sustainable growth in international trade following the disruptions and further inequalities in supply chains caused by the pandemic.

Session abstract:

The Organisation of Women in International Trade, UK Chapter (OWIT UK) and Women's Economic Imperative (WEIForward) are hosting a joint working session during this year's WTO Public Forum. This session will look at ways in which government and private enterprise can collaborate to ensure the broadest range of opportunities remain open to all women to acquire digital skills, build resilience and ensure sustainable growth in international trade following the disruptions and further inequalities in supply chains caused by the pandemic. The panel discussion will feature expert representatives from the UK Government, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations and global trade experts. Outcomes from the session will suggest possible collaborative areas such as digital transformation and solutions which can then be implemented and shared as best practice globally.

Potential panellists for this session

The WTO strongly encourages diversity on the panel including gender, geographical representation and perspective. Please indicate panellist background (i.e., academic community, NGO representative, business community, government official, IGO representative, journalist etc...).

Moderator

First Name: Noreen
Last Name: Cesareo
Title: President
Organization: OWIT UK

Panellists 1 (INVITED TBC)

First Name: Stephen
Last Name: Fevrier
Title: Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Delegation and Head of Mission of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States to the United Nations in Geneva
Organization: Organization of Eastern Caribbean States to the United Nations in Geneva

Panellist 2

First Name: Chris
Last Name: Southworth
Title: Secretary General, International Chamber of Commerce UK & Director of the Secretariat for the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Trade and Export Promotion
Organization: International Chamber of Commerce

WTO Public Forum 2021 - OWIT UK

<https://owituk.org/>

[Panellist 3](#)

First Name: Susan
Last Name: Barton
Title: Team Leader - Trade and Gender Equality
Organization: UK Department of Trade

[Panellist 4 \(INVITED TBC\)](#)

First Name: Dr. Amrita
Last Name: Bahri
Title: Assistant Professor of International Trade Law at ITAM and Co-Chair Professor for WTO Chair Program (Mexico)
Organization: ITAM Mexico

*Explain how your session relates to the theme of this year's Public Forum and provide a brief description of the session, including the objective(s) and relevant questions that will be addressed.**

Prior to the pandemic, studies showed that businesses which trade internationally are more productive than their domestically focused competitors. However, women-owned businesses are less likely to operate across borders than those owned by men.

Most Women-owned businesses are micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). As a result, they often face higher costs to overcome trade and cultural barriers, and access international markets. They also suffer from limited access to STEAM education and digital skills, trade finance and contractual support. The playing field for women in international trade was already unequal prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

While digital trade and e-commerce have helped to mitigate some of the barriers to trade and the negative impact of the Pandemic crisis, the ensuing disruptions in supply chains and trade links left women vulnerable to losing ground and a sizeable share of the economic gains they have made in the past.

The broader impact of international trade restrictions and supply chain shifts is particularly acute in developing economies and within certain sectors such as textiles and garments, hospitality, etc. Given the added risks to women from the impact of COVID-19 compound existing inequities on trade, it is even more important to build resilience and bridge the gaps that hinder growth, making sure it is not only faster, but more sustainable and inclusive too.

The UK, as a new trading nation post-Brexit, has been incorporating good practice in its agreements. This year, it was in the spotlight as it hosted the G7 meetings, and it is now including commitments on promoting women and gender empowerment in international trade. However there is more to be done. Gender equality requires greater investment in STEAM education, digital transformation, enterprise skills, support systems, signposting and other infrastructure. For women to fully benefit from trade, they need to have better access to education, financial resources and digital technology.

This is where collaboration between government and private sector is required. There are already cases where organisations, retailers, brands and suppliers have adopted voluntary gender-related initiatives to promote women's access to the supply chain, to training for skills development, health services, maternity benefits, leadership and financial management.

In our working session we bring together expert representatives from the UK Government, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations and global trade experts who will look to share best practice and discuss

WTO Public Forum 2021 - OWIT UK

<https://owituk.org/>

possible collaborative solutions between government and private sector. These discussions will put forward suggestions that ensure the broadest range of opportunities remain open to all women to acquire digital skills, build resilience and ensure sustainable growth in international trade following the disruptions and further inequalities in supply chains caused by the pandemic.

*Provide an abstract of your session (no more than 150 words). An abstract summarizes your proposed session/workshop. If selected, this abstract will be inserted in the programme and posted on the website of the Public Forum prior to the event.**

The Organisation of Women in International Trade, UK Chapter (OWIT UK) and Women's Economic Imperative (WEIForward) are hosting a joint working session during this year's WTO Public Forum. This session will look at ways in which government and private enterprise can collaborate to ensure the broadest range of opportunities remain open to all women to optimize digital trade and to acquire digital skills, build resilience and ensure sustainable growth in international trade following the disruptions and further inequalities in supply chains caused by the pandemic.

The panel discussion will feature expert representatives from the UK Government, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations and global trade experts.

Outcomes from the session will suggest possible collaborative areas such as digital transformation and solutions which can then be implemented and shared as best practice globally.