

Empowering Women in the Trade Space

A South Asian Perspective



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- While South Asia sees a rise in women holding public office, government spending on women's education and health continues to remain stagnant and low.
- Investments in girls' education: equips them with valuable skills, contributes to a more skilled workforce - increased productivity and innovation.
- Improved health outcomes for women are linked to economic gains.

Indicators	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)	19.3	19.4	19.4	17.1	19.0	18.9	19.0	18.2
Unmet need for contraception (% of married women ages 15-49)	..	..	..	..	11.2	..	..	..
Women's share of population ages 15+ living with HIV (%)	..	..	..	..	..	..	37.5	..
Prevalence of anemia among women of reproductive age (% of women ages 15-49)	49.2	49.1	49.2	49.3	49.4	..	..	..
Prevalence of anemia among pregnant women (%)	48.5	48.2	48.1	47.9	47.7	..	..	..
Pregnant women receiving prenatal care (%)	..	..	..	..	84.8	..	..	..
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19)	34.4	32.5	32.0	31.0	29.7	29.1	28.9	..
Contraceptive prevalence, any modern method (% of married women ages 15-49)	..	..	..	..	52.2	..	..	..
Contraceptive prevalence, any method (% of married women ages 15-49)	..	..	..	..	61.4	..	..	..
Demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods (% of married women with demand for family planning)	..	..	..	71.3	..	..	..	..

South Asia Women's Health Snapshot

Source: Author's estimations and World Development Indicators 2024



Countries with higher levels of gender equality see a rise in female entrepreneurship

Women economic empowerment

Business landscape diversification

Promoting innovation

Trade competitiveness boost in the global market

Trade linkages, facilitated by bilateral and multilateral agreements, are important for stability and growth in global economies

GSP+ has empowered women by enhancing their accessibility to European markets, particularly in sectors like apparel

Regional trade agreements (SAFTA) - South Asian region's commitment to improving economic growth and stability

SAARC Bazaar and SAES enable women-led enterprises to showcase their ideas, products, and services across borders

FTAs offer potential for integrating women-owned and women-led businesses into the global and regional economies

Despite the potential of initiatives like SAFTA to promote trade and economic growth in South Asia, the reality is very different



SAARC-wide trade agreements fallen short of expectations - SAFTA facing criticism for its limited impact on promoting trade, particularly for women-led businesses



Gender-specific barriers further impede women's engagement in regional and international trade under SAFTA

Unequal access to finance,
Limited business networks,
Lack of training and support services tailored for women entrepreneurs

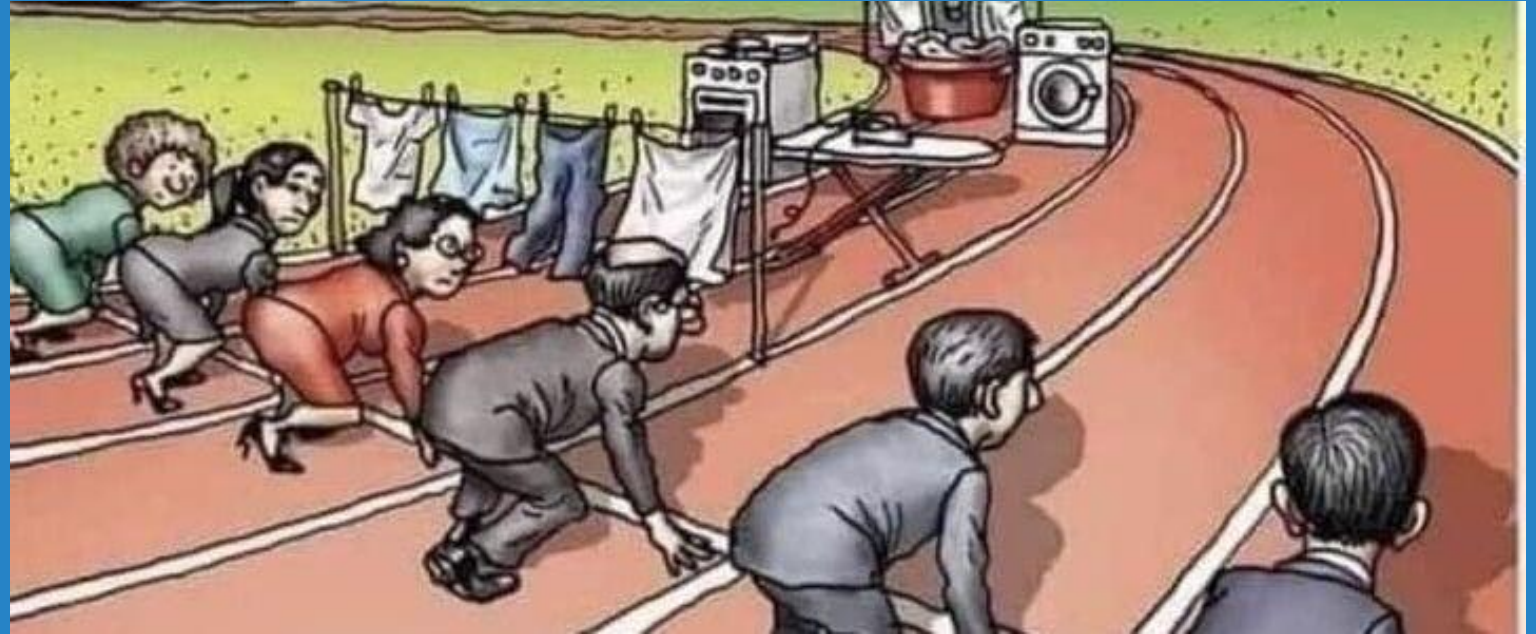


Trade agreements, if not designed with gender lens, can exacerbate existing inequalities

Failing to address these structural barriers and not promoting gender-inclusive trade agreements could lead to missed economic opportunities for Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka



Findings based on our consultations, surveys, and
key informant interviews



Limitations faced by women-focused firms to integrate globally

Women, Business and the Law 2024 2.0 indicator scores

Bangladesh										
	Safety	Mobility	Workplace	Pay	Marriage	Parenthood	Childcare	Entrepreneurship	Assets	Pension
Legal frameworks score	0.0	75.0	25.0	25.0	50.0	25.0	50.0	25.0	25.0	25.0
Supportive frameworks score	25.0	66.7	0.0	0.0	100.0	33.3	25.0	66.7	33.3	0.0
Expert opinions score	25.0	25.0	25.0	25.0	25.0	37.5	25.0	25.0	0.0	50.0
Pakistan										
	Safety	Mobility	Workplace	Pay	Marriage	Parenthood	Childcare	Entrepreneurship	Assets	Pension
Legal frameworks score	50.0	75.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	25.0	0.0	50.0	25.0	50.0
Supportive frameworks score	50.0	33.3	0.0	50.0	66.7	33.3	0.0	33.3	0.0	50.0
Expert opinions score	0.0	25.0	37.5	25.0	25.0	12.5	0.0	25.0	0.0	50.0
Sri Lanka										
	Safety	Mobility	Workplace	Pay	Marriage	Parenthood	Childcare	Entrepreneurship	Assets	Pension
Legal frameworks score	25.0	100.0	25.0	25.0	100.0	25.0	0.0	25.0	75.0	50.0
Supportive frameworks score	25.0	66.7	0.0	50.0	66.7	0.0	25.0	66.7	0.0	0.0
Expert opinions score	25.0	37.5	31.3	25.0	25.0	56.3	25.0	25.0	62.5	100.0

Source: Women, Business, and the Law 2024: Dataset Available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

Trade protectionism and sustainability demands

Rising trade protectionism reshaping global market access for South Asia

U.S. tariffs (19% on Pakistan; 20% on Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) reduce competitiveness

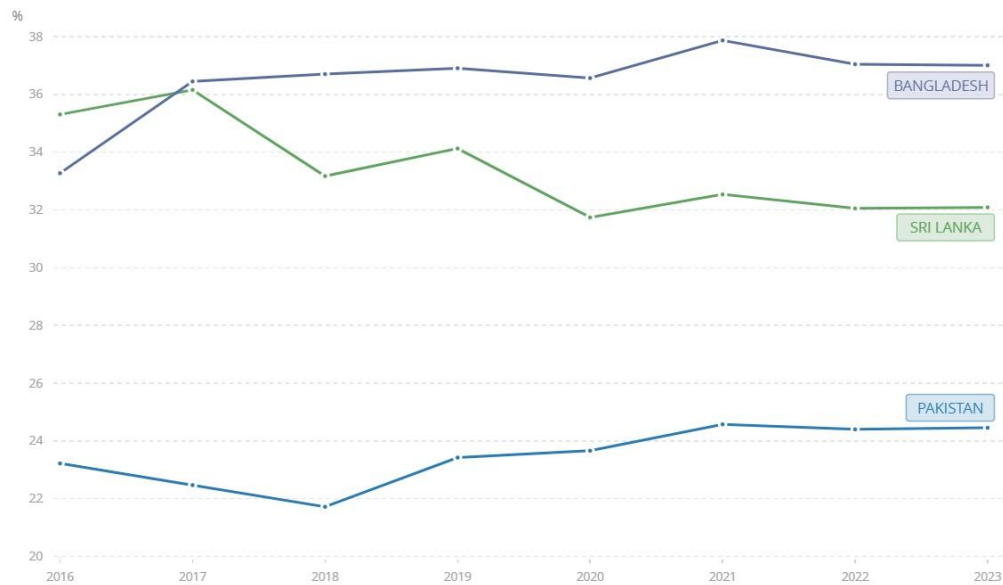
Women-led firms hit harder due to limited compliance capacity

New EU rules (CSDDD, CBAM) tighten sustainability standards

Risk of exclusion from high-value markets widens gender trade gap

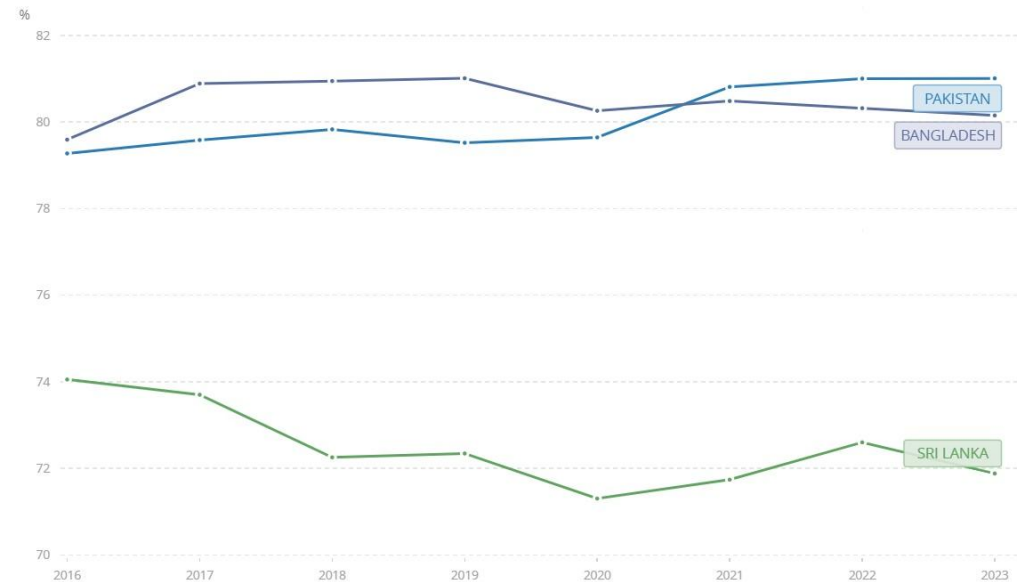
Socio-cultural challenges

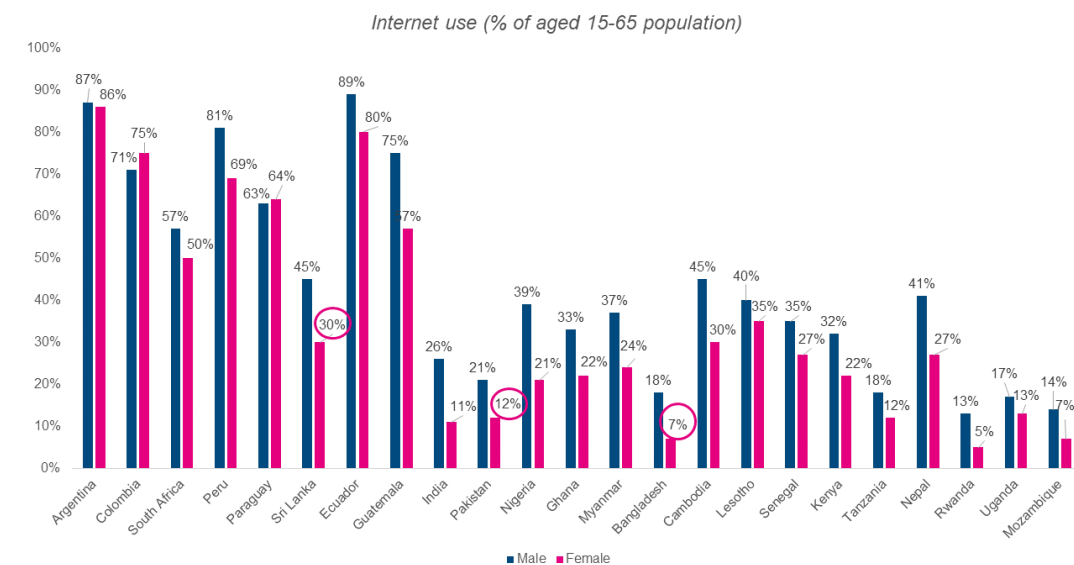
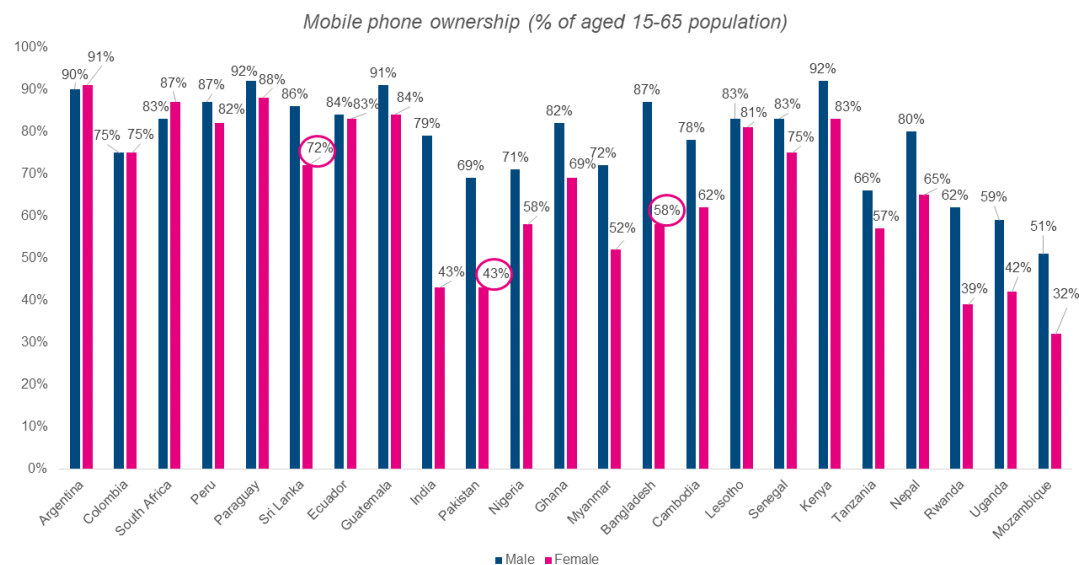
Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh



Source: World Bank Data

Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh





Limited access to digital technology

Source: AfterAccess nationally representative surveys, 2019

	Bangladesh		Pakistan		Sri Lanka	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
I don't know what the internet is	64	69	62	76	38	37
No interest/not useful	19	17	7	5	31	32
No access device computer/smartphone	8	6	25	12	12	11
I don't know how to use it	6	5	3	4	11	13
No time, too busy	2	1	1	1	4	3
Too expensive	1	1	1	0	3	2
I am not allowed to use the internet	0	1	0	1	0	1
Other	0	1	1	0	1	2

Source: AfterAccess nationally representative surveys, 2019

Other Limitations



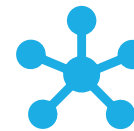
Informal enterprises
and market
integration barriers



Limited access to
finance



Weak capacity
building opportunities



Lack of business
networks and support



Policy and regulatory
barriers

Role of public and private sectors in empowering women in trade

Public Sector

Bangladesh

- The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Information and the Ministry of ICT are providing trainings to women on digital trade for empowering and training their female entrepreneurs
- Planning Division of the Government of Bangladesh has devised the Eighth Five-Year Plan (2020-2025) – emphasis on increasing their economic participation, and creating an enabling environment for their advancement

Pakistan

- TDAP - women representation in all general delegations sent abroad by giving subsidy
- SMEDA launched Women Business Development Center (WBDC) in Mingora, Swat to accelerate the successful development and progress of women entrepreneurs
- 5Es Framework by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives seeks to create an enabling environment for women in trade and economic activities

Sri Lanka

- The Sri Lanka EDB's Women Entrepreneurs Development Program - empowering women MSMEs for trade (over 800 businesses have registered)
- National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, launched by Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment on International Women's Day 2023

Despite notable efforts by Governments of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, there are still several gaps due to which women are not able to fully integrate into the trade space

Major reason – lack of data and evidence around women-led businesses

- The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) states that about 24.6% of all SMEs in the nation are female-owned SMEs
- Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCP) reveals Pakistan has only 1% female entrepreneurs compared to 21% male entrepreneurs
- Sri Lanka EDB reflects that only 25% of entrepreneurs are women in the SME sector

Governments also failed to facilitate women in successfully acquiring the requisite financial resources to carry out trading activities

Current bilateral FTAs between Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka provide preferences to certain sectors, leaving space for trade diversification so that women-specific sectors may also be included

Private Sector

Bangladesh	Women comprise 60-70% of the RMG workforce (biggest export earning sector of Bangladesh) Under FBCCI, 14 women chambers and four business associations emerging to be pivotal platforms for women entrepreneurs to access trade markets internationally
Pakistan	FPCCI reports 27 Women's chambers of commerce & industry registered FPCCI announced 50% membership fee waiver for women standing committees to increase women's presence in the trade milieu
Sri Lanka	Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and Industry is working efficiently on providing women with networking opportunities, knowledge and supports collaborations between women focused businesses to expand

Gaps and Opportunities

Lack of up-to-date information on websites

Lack of public private partnerships

Distrust that exists between public and private sectors

Women chambers side-lined and matters pertaining to women businesses not prioritized

Recommendations

Inclusive policymaking
to promote women in
trade

Making available
evidence and data
regarding women in
trade

Awareness initiatives
to overcome
sociocultural barriers

Orientation and
capacity-building of
existing women
enterprises

Capacity building of
individuals from
relevant public/private
sector entities

Structured Public-
Private dialogue
process

Enhancing online
presence to attract
funding for women
networks

Empowering women
in trade through
financial access

Empowering women
in trade through
financial literacy

Product and market
diversification under
trade agreements

Ensuring access to
technology and
improving digital
literacy

Integrate women
entrepreneurs into
trade policy dialogues

Thank you!

