



eTrade for Women

Fostering Women Entrepreneurship in the Digital Economy

Insights from UNCTAD's eTrade for Women Advocates | 2019-2021 Cohort



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EMPOWERING WOMEN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES



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Foreword

The rapid spread of digital technologies is creating new opportunities for growth and development, especially in developing countries. Yet, the benefits of digitalization are not automatic and women, across regions and continents, still face multiple obstacles to succeed in the digital economy.

Factors that hold women back are multi-dimensional. They relate to gender bias, lower participation in decision-making processes, limited digital skills, lack of trust, and unequal access to funding, among others.

If left unaddressed, gender divides will continue to widen. Recent data show that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030 - which is one of the targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda. This year's tracker on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality, reveals a concerning regression in women's economic empowerment.

But this is by no means a lost cause.

In 2019, UNCTAD launched the eTrade for Women initiative, with the ambitious objective to empower more women in developing countries to embrace digital transformations, not just as consumers or buyers, but as leaders, sellers, and innovators.

A unique feature of eTrade for Women is the privileged relationship established with the eTrade for Women Advocates, outstanding women leaders in the digital economy, who have contributed to shaping the digital ecosystems in their countries and regions.

Together, while weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, we have supported over 200 women-led businesses in 30 developing countries across continents.

I am delighted to present this report which captures some of the main learnings from the first cohort of Advocates (2019-2021). Each one of them shares important lessons and recommendations of actionable measures to advance women's participation in the digital economy.

The actions we take today will help shape a more gender-inclusive digital economy, where everyone can benefit equally from the biggest economic transformation of our times.

Shamika N. Sirimanne

Director, Division on Technology and Logistics

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Introduction

Digital entrepreneurship can be a powerful avenue for women's inclusion in the digital economy, with new business opportunities, efficiency gains, and better access to markets and global value chains. Yet, women entrepreneurs are much less represented in the digital economy than men, especially in developing economies. This gap translates into missed economic opportunities and may aggravate existing gender inequalities.

To understand how to increase women's participation in the digital economy and reduce the digital gender divide - in line with Sustainable Development Goals 5 (gender equality) and 8 (decent work and economic growth) - it is critical to investigate the specific needs and constraints that women face as entrepreneurs, as well as the enabling factors that can further support the growth of women-led digital businesses.

Building on the experience of UNCTAD's eTrade for Women initiative, and more specifically on the first cohort of eTrade for Women Advocates, this paper reviews the main obstacles that women digital entrepreneurs encounter in developing countries. It sheds lights on the entrepreneurial paths of the Advocates, who have been at the forefront of the digital transformation in their respective regions, and highlights some of the factors that have been instrumental to their success as business leaders. It also explores actionable measures that could be put in place to help more women follow in the footsteps of the Advocates to grow successful digital businesses and be influential players in the digital economy.

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