

Women in leadership: Levelling the field

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Pradeep S. Mehta's¹ Speaking Notes

Women make enormous contributions to economies, whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees, or by doing unpaid care work at home.

1. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has harbingered a fundamental transformation in modern manufacturing. Technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain have created a breakthrough impact on this sector. These have the potential to create value across dimensions – individuals, society, firms and factory floor. Not only does it affect our current supply chains but it paves a pathway for establishing new value chains. This is enabled as digital connectivity opens up new ways of collaboration between companies at different levels of the value chain. While it enables greater workforce horizontally between industries and customers as well as vertically, amongst the industries, upskilling, especially of women, remains a challenge. It includes both aspects – shortage of talent and right-skilling. An ecosystem which encapsulates multi-stakeholder skilling is the need of the hour.
2. Digitalisation has become a necessity rather than an option and sellers who do not change their traditional ways with time are likely to suffer losses. With the onset of digital transformation, new avenues for economic empowerment are being unlocked which may contribute to great levels of

¹ Secretary General, CUTS International
Email- psm@cuts.org

gender equality. Women onboarding to e-commerce platforms and digitalisation of businesses can help level the playing field for women and men since customers can be reached across the world, larger markets can be accessed as well as cultural norms can be addressed. Digital technologies, and the flexible ways of working they may enable, could help foster more gender-balanced career paths and reduce income inequalities. While the inherent idea may be to promote greater employment opportunities to all, women tend to possess lower levels of technical and leadership skills. This excludes women from holding managerial positions. A report by the International Labour Organisation indicates 48.5 percent female labour force participation, which is 26.5 percent below their male counterparts. Women are largely employed in the unorganised sector and their number is either hidden or unknown. Hence it is important to include digital technologies in educational institutions for girls so as to improve their skills in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), to enhance employability across industries around the world.

3. CUTS International has been ardently working on a project- Fostering a Digital Footprint for Women Enterprises in India. After all, Covid-19 has enhanced the dependence upon e-commerce platforms. This, in addition to digital transformational technology has motivated women to become entrepreneurs but it is not without hurdles. These problems could be gender based digital exclusions like internet access, affordability, technical illiteracy and other socio-cultural norms. This initiative will try to assess the gender gap through evidence based research with the aim to understand experience and benefits realised by women entrepreneurs in adopting digital technologies, challenges faced by them in digital on-boarding and using digital technologies, and make policy recommendations for a better transition. As evident from the research findings of the project Gender

Dimensions of Trade facilitation in the BBIN countries implemented by CUTS, women entrepreneurs who are participating in cross border trade have poor access to internet services, devices and digital technology. Even those who own smartphones are not using it for business purposes because of ignorance. This corroborates the GSMA report of 2019 which points out that the mobile gender gap is the widest in South Asia where women are 28 percent less likely than men to own a mobile and 58 percent less likely to use mobile internet. In most cases when women own a mobile phone, they use a smaller range of mobile service.

4. From a broader perspective, the IR4 is said to smash gender inequality but if looked into closely, it has deepened inequality. In countries where women spend almost eight times the amount of time on unpaid activities than men, they represent only 35 percent of the working population. Addressing the digital gender divide requires raising awareness on ways on how to tackle gender stereotypes. To address this gap, CUTS is designing a capacity building programme for women traders on the use of digital technology for business. Gender inequalities in unpaid care work are also linked with the gender gaps in the labour force, be it skilled or unskilled.
5. Digitalisation has made internet access and usage a public good instead of a luxury. But in low and middle income countries a large number of women are unconnected as compared to men. Organisations like the UN Women are providing training to young women to increase access to employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. But keeping in mind the current transition in the way markets function due to digitalisation, especially after the pandemic, there should be a wider and proper dissemination of these initiatives. Internet access is a human right and international organisations should address as well as bring together all the countries to catalyse a

collective action. Investing in women's economic empowerment clears the path towards gender equality and inclusive economic growth. These initiatives would ensure that on a global level digitalisation bridges gender gaps instead of expanding them.

6. While support from an international organisation is imperative, governments on a local level can pursue policies to promote the role of women in varied sectors. Policies such as paid leave, affordable childcare, and access to flexible working can only go so far in promoting women's access to leadership. However, a national level policy is needed for marking progress in the positions of women in leadership. A dual policy implementation can include laws that set a minimum quota of women on the board and gender provisions in the corporate governance codes.
7. The manufacturing industry is preparing to adapt to new digital opportunities for growth. And to fully seize this opportunity it is essential especially for developing countries to tackle the gender gaps. We must ensure that this digital transformation is a leapfrog opportunity for women in order to build a more inclusive digital world. The CUTS 7th Biennial Conference on Competition, Regulation and Development held on 16-17 November, focused on how we can build a more inclusive and a resilient economy. Renowned speakers from across the globe affiliated to international organisations were the interlocutors. The panellists unanimously agreed that the pandemic has exacerbated unemployment, not only at the levels of workers but also, at the level of MSMEs especially those led by women. In the developing economies, larger populations of working women are employed in the unorganised sector with low paying semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. With the growing gig economy, the wage gap in the unorganised sector, if not regulated, would only widen.

8. To conclude, policy, especially in the form of co-ordinated and complementary actions, may trigger a more inclusive path, based on narrowing digital and gender gaps. These gaps will not just expand gender inequalities but also limit innovation and scope of new technologies. Safer and more affordable access to digital tools and fostering strong cooperation across stakeholders to remove barriers in women's full participation in the digital world.