

Are WTO debates on gender and e-commerce working for women's empowerment? What needs to shift?

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# 1. Policy euphoria around the digital opportunity for women's economic empowerment

Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment (MC-11, December 2017 supported by over 121 WTO members)

- emphasis on how the moment for women's entrepreneurial freedom is finally here with the digital revolution

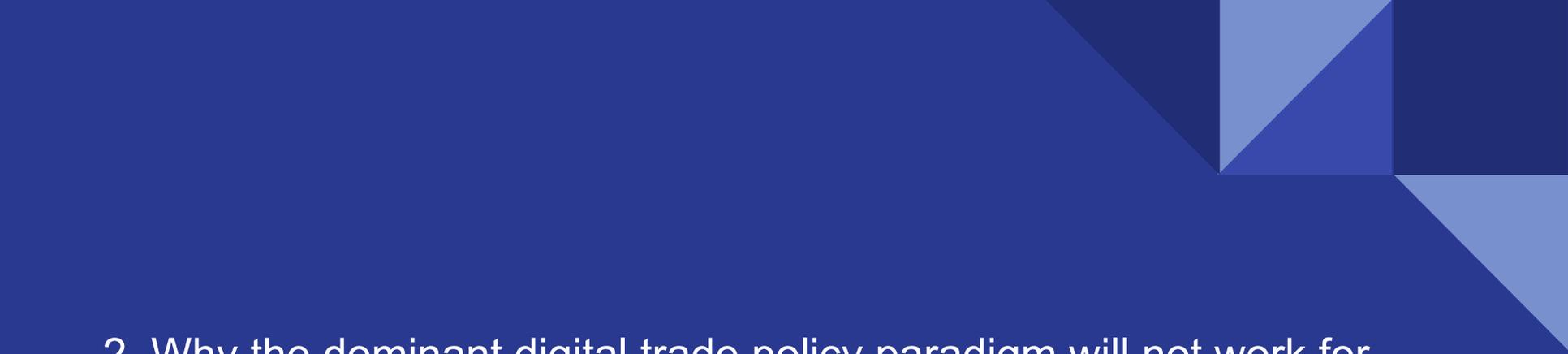
- prescribed pathway being effective integration of women's MSMEs into the digital marketplace and global value chains of the digital economy



Prevailing sentiment  
is one of digital  
exuberance about  
digital trade  
liberalization

Inclusive digital trade is about leveraging the digital opportunity for small businesses, women, young people, especially those in developing countries (...) we need to make trade rules easier and simpler. We need to protect trade (not) trade protectionism. This means more free trade, and more globalisation

- Jack Ma, WTO Public Forum, 2018



## 2. Why the dominant digital trade policy paradigm will not work for women in the global South

# Issue 1. Unfair terms of participation in the digital marketplace

In digital marketplace controlled by handful of platform companies, women's MSMEs face formidable barriers to market participation:

- membership fees, commission rates – as high as 40% (ITC survey 2017)
  - sellers not on a level playing field (eg. Amazon Fulfilled conditionalities)
  - non-transparent and opaque algorithmic ranking metrics (eg. Buy Back algorithm)
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## Shrinking policy space

-Plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce led by US, EU and Japan take away policy space to build a gender- inclusive e-commerce marketplace grounded in a public utility approach, because of

prohibition on mandatory access to/disclosure of source code/algorithms;

prohibition on conditionalities related to location of computing facilities; and

demand for completely unrestricted cross-border transfers of data

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## Issue 2. Digital restructuring of agriculture and new forms of exclusion

In Asian and African region, where most food production is from women smallholder farms, e-commerce companies have been making steady inroads

a. e-commerce platforms getting into cross-border supply chains of agricultural commodities – new “farm to fork models” (Alibaba’s 12,000 hectares in New Zealand dairy farming)

b. agri-tech platforms in Africa supported by venture capital for integrated info-services, credit and input advisories. Who is being made legible to whom?

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## Deregulation that ignores digital restructuring of agriculture

a. RCEP national treatment provisions: land markets may need to be opened to investors from all countries (GRAIN 2019)

b. without the power to introduce data localisation measures and assert data sovereignty, valuable data about women's agricultural practices will be expropriated by transnational digital corporations and solutions produced will not give women farmers an equal share in the value.

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### 3. Way forward

(1) Preserving the policy space of developing countries to set the pace of digital trade liberalisation

(2) An international treaty on data governance that acknowledges jurisdictional sovereignty over data flows as an integral part of the right to development

(3) Digital public goods approach for women's economic empowerment

- public utility e-commerce platforms, with affirmative action to promote uptake by women's entrepreneurs
- seed funding and access to public data pools for inclusive innovation

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### 3. Way forward (contd.)

- A three point agenda of digital justice, gender justice and economic justice , with inter-movement alliances

civil society mobilisation against RCEP

open letter from women's organisations on the joint declaration on trade and women's economic empowerment etc.

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