

HELPING WOMEN EXPORT SERVICES

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The growing trend towards outsourcing business support services, coupled with e-trade possibilities, offers increased opportunities for women in all countries to export services. Women are generally known as owners of small retail operations or in the types of services (nursing, teaching, secretarial services, domestic services) that are traditionally seen as “women’s work.” Less visible is their growing role as principals in firms that provide professional services, financial services, and construction. Service industries offer women the opportunity to establish businesses with relatively little capital and, with the advent of the Internet, that have the potential to be operated from a home base.

But women business owners continue to have less involvement in export activities than their male counterparts. In large part this is due to time and resource constraints because of the “double burden” of women in virtually all societies. Even if women do not have child care responsibilities, cultural mores usually dictate that women will run households, care for aging or disabled relatives, and volunteer in their communities – in addition to engaging in paid work. So women business owners approach exporting with significant time constraints. Expanding the number of successful women exporters will require a six-pronged approach.

#1: Access to Markets

Success in services exporting depends on developing networks of referral contacts and potential foreign partners, typically through travel to international markets. Women report that finding the time and resources for travel is the number one constraint on their exporting activities. This travel is particularly important for women because they are often marginalized within the business networks in their own countries. Women’s business networks can help bridge the gap though women also need contacts in the business mainstream. Initiatives that can help include introducing women business owners to foreign investors so that they have the opportunity to “export” services in their country (by selling to foreign-owned companies), and nominating women business owners as speakers at international conferences (with travel support provided).

#2: Access to Trade Development Activities

In general, women are underrepresented in workshops and trade missions intended to help firms export. In part this is due to time constraints and in part to a lack of knowledge of the types of assistance that are available. Unless special gender initiatives are undertaken, women are often not members of the sponsoring bodies for trade-related events (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce and Industry). Associations can engage in a win-win strategy of reaching out to women business owners, thereby gaining more members and also helping women engage in important business networks. Another factor that can increase women’s engagement in trade development activities is to ensure that the timing of association events do not conflict with prime times (e.g., breakfast, evenings) for family responsibilities.

#3: Access to Technology

Access to cost-efficient, high speed Internet connections is critical for exporting success. Women business owners may face difficulties in gaining additional phone lines for Internet hook-up, especially if they are located outside of the main urban areas. Making globally competitive information and communication technology affordable and available needs to be a priority in supporting women's export opportunities.

#4: Access to Education and Training

In some cultures, the education and training of women still takes second place to the education of men. In countries where women do gain basic education, there is still the issue of access to technical training in information and communication technologies as well as ongoing skills upgrading for competitiveness. Existing training programs need to be examined to make sure that there are no gender biases in recruitment and delivery.

#5: Access to Finance

While most service firms are not capital intensive, women business owners do need access to finance for the purchase of information and communication technology, for growth, and for export market development. Research shows that women generally have to use their own personal resources, which limits potential export growth. In developing and transitional economies in particular, options such as microcredit schemes have often been designed for commodity or handicraft producers and need to be repositioned for service firms.

#6: Access to Role Models

Most fundamentally, many young girls do not have role models of women entrepreneurs, especially in services. This issue is exacerbated, in developing and transitional economies, by the fact that most development initiatives targeting women assume that they should be engaged in goods production of some sort. Success stories of women who own service businesses and export need to be widely publicized.