

DDG González

Keynote speech: "Gender in international economic negotiations"

Joint webinar on "Gender and Trade in the Americas" WTO Chairs in Chile, Mexico and Barbados

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Professors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to launch and open this series of seminars on "Gender and Trade in the Americas" and I would like to commend the WTO Chairs from Mexico, Barbados and Chile for this initiative.

Women's economic empowerment has gained momentum in the last years. It has actually become a global trend.

We live in an interconnected world and it has shown us that gender equality sits at the intersection of many international issues, negotiations and policies. Take climate change, labour, trade or the COVID 19 pandemic. All include a gender perspective because women are at the centre of countries' economic and social lives.

When some countries face general workforce shortages, including in male dominated sectors, they are turning to women to fill the gaps. In many countries, men have left rural areas for the cities where they can find jobs, leaving the women in charge of the land. In some parts of the world, men are migrating to other countries to find jobs and earn income, leaving women in charge at home. Now, more women migrate to find jobs themselves to support their families.

From these trends, it is clear that women constitute an economic force. The more they are involved, the more economies grow. This is what data is telling us. Increasing women's participation in the labour market to the same level as men's could raise some countries GDP up to 34% (IMF 2013).

Investing in women and integrating them in the economy impacts job creation, economic diversification, innovation, entrepreneurship, poverty reduction and development.

On job creation: women entrepreneurs are job creators for themselves and others. Many businesswomen actually employ other women. In particular, in South Asia, East Africa and Latin America, 57% of workers employed by women owned micro companies are female (WTO regional surveys South Asia, East Africa and Latin America 2019-2020).

On countries' economic diversification: women tend to be more involved in the services sector thus fostering diversification. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are actually including women's economic empowerment in their new economic diversification strategies, recognising women's key role in the economy (Vision 2030).

On innovation: women tend to be more innovative than men – they have 5% more chances to be more innovative (GEM report 2016-2017). When trained in new technologies, women entrepreneurs tend to use them more than men to run their businesses (AsDB 2019). Take Russia, many women entrepreneurs own companies that make nano technology products. Women successfully master the sphere of information technology. This is of particular importance in connection with the transition to a digital economy.

On poverty reduction and development: Most women entrepreneurs contribute to their family house expenses (rent, education, etc) and in the overall family income. In South Asia, East Africa and Latin America, they are women's second and third pillar of investment after their businesses (WTO regional surveys South Asia, East Africa and Latin America 2019-2020).

On entrepreneurship, women-owned enterprises account for approximately 30% to 37% (8–10 million) of all MSMEs in emerging markets (IFC 2011). In the BRICS countries, on average, women business owners represent 25% (WTO count on current data).

All these elements are driving economic growth and trade has a role to play in fostering women's empowerment and advancing gender equality.

Various trade instruments and policies include gender perspectives. Some WTO Members have negotiated gender chapters in their trade agreements. Today, 13% of RTAs notified to the WTO include gender issues (WTO 2019). Latin American countries, namely Uruguay and Chile, have been pioneers in integrating gender provisions in their trade agreements. But we can also turn to Africa to learn more on trade and gender and how to negotiate gender provisions in trade agreements. From early the 90's onwards, African countries have included gender chapters in their agreements. Interestingly, out of 62 agreements adopted by African countries, 20 include provisions on gender equality. Of the 54 provisions contained in these 20 agreements, 16 are binding and 43% of these binding rules are subjected to a monitoring or a dispute settlement mechanism.

Trade negotiations can also result in social change. According to the World Medical Association (2019), "gender is a social determinant of health and health problems". Many women and girls fail to access health care because of based gender bias. Many female doctors or nurses have been prevented from, or face barriers to practicing their profession due to social norms. Many women face restrictions in accessing health care and benefits, whether they work in the formal or informal sector. Some trade agreements address these issues. Provisions on healthcare benefiting women have been included in 7 free trade agreements, ranging from maternity benefits, to childcare and compulsory access to medical insurance.

International economic and trade negotiations can also shift policies at the national level.

WTO Members are also devising national trade policies that are gender responsive. The WTO has mapped out these policies and between 2014 and 2018, WTO Members have implemented 30 different types of trade policies in 12 trade areas to support women. And since 2018, more than half of the WTO Members under trade policy review provided information on their gender-responsive trade policies. But one could question what role gender has in trade policy.

A gender responsive trade policy can lift the many obstacles faced by women in trade

Though financial and non-financial incentives: For instance, some countries have set up financial support to women in export businesses, to foster their access to international markets. This type of assistance can take the form of a cost-sharing grant with the aim of developing specific sectors, finding new export markets and promoting women in the export sector. Others have just simplified business license procedures for women entrepreneurs. Some have provided financial incentives to the private sector to hire women

By giving access to trade related infrastructure in rural areas through Aid for trade. For instance, Canada has supported Burkina Faso in rural electrification, particularly through the promotion of solar energy, as well as associated business development for women.

A gender responsive trade policy can create new opportunities for women

For example, most governments introduce preference schemes for women owned small businesses in their procurement policies or cut trade related red tape for women entrepreneurs. Governments can also create opportunities for women to enter the workforce. For example, Japan, opened its national services market to foreign housekeeping workers allowing Japanese women in need for household assistance to integrate the workforce. Thus, Japan transformed unpaid work into paid work reducing gender discrimination. Lastly trade policies can create export opportunities by enhancing female farmers technical and organizational skills to comply with Sanitary and Phyto Sanitary requirements (The Gambia - 2018).

A gender responsive trade policy can also reduce wage gaps. Switzerland has integrated gender wage equality requirements in its government procurement. It can also introduce non-discrimination measures in countries labour codes to facilitate women's work in export sectors and companies.

To support governments in designing such trade policies, the WTO is developing a set of specific trade and gender policy tools such as a database of gender responsive trade policies implemented by WTO members and of gender provisions contained in FTAs and RTAs; A questionnaire and a checklist for governments to examine/investigate where they stand in terms of gender integration into their trade policies, strategies, programmes and action plans; a trade and gender policy guidebook and concrete indicators for implementing trade rules with gender lens. The WTO has also set up a training programme to build WTO Members capacity on trade and gender.

Building capacity is also about bringing political awareness on trade and gender issues. That includes improving female leadership in trade. Negotiators and policy makers are often the same and they are mostly men. In the WTO, 21% of ministers in charge of WTO affairs are female (2019) and 22% of WTO Ambassadors are women (2020). Increasing and strengthening female leadership in trade may also impact positively international negotiations and it could better facilitate the integration of women's empowerment issues into trade. But this is not a given.

December 2017 has been a key milestone for the WTO with regards to women's economic empowerment. At that time, 118 WTO members and observers – now 127 - have joined the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment.

This Declaration has served as a stepping-stone to better understand how and why trade impacts women and it has been a catalyst for the establishment of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender in the WTO last September. After technical discussions on data collection, trade policies, Aid for Trade, capacity building and gender concepts applied to WTO, the Informal Working Group is working towards MC12 crafting a concrete package to be adopted at the WTO Ministerial Conference at the end of this year that would impact women's lives on the ground and help them reaping the benefits of international trade.

It is undeniable that trade can help women but it cannot do it alone. Most societies where women live and work are not gender neutral and women still face a lot of obstacles: gender bias laws and social norms, access to finance, access to skills and knowledge (especially on trade rules).

In today's world, things have become tougher for women as they have suffered from the economic and social consequences of the COVID19 pandemic. Women have been impacted mostly because of the disadvantages they face in the economic, social, financial and regulatory ecosystems they are economically operating in and which have been exacerbated by the crisis. The COVID19 pandemic has even set women backwards economically and socially. Only 9% of all COVID19 related relief measures taken globally, to mitigate the impact of COVID19, support women's economic security (UNDP's COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker). **This shows us that we still have a long road ahead of us to make gender equality a reality across the world. But we are working towards it and the WTO is engaged in contributing to gender equality in many ways as women's empowerment is now an integral part of its work.**

Thank you.