



Women's International Day - 8 March 2019

"Unlocking Trade for Women's Empowerment through Innovation and Sustainability"

Speech

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Thank you Shishir for giving me the floor.

I am very honoured to be on this panel this morning.

And to be given the opportunity to speak to all of you today on this important IWD2019 on an issue I have become passionate about and I hope a worthy advocate.

Yes, you have heard right, I said become.

Like everybody else in the WTO for many years and at least for the first 10 years of my career here, I did not think about trade and gender – together. For me, trade rules were gender neutral. That was it! So, imagine my surprise when I was asked 2 years ago to look into the links between trade, gender and development.

Digging deeper, I realised that trade is not gender neutral. The deeper I analyse the more I see the demand for gender responsive trade.

Of course, you will say that there is no mention of gender in the 500 pages of the WTO rulebook. Actually, it's when those rules are implemented that we can see disparity in the implications of the rules on men and women across various categories of age and geographical location.

I will give you a simple example in the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). When implementing the TFA, Members are digitalizing customs procedures. This has a positive impact on women.

By processing their paperwork online, they can:

- Avoid customs officials biased and abuse: women wait 37% longer on average than men to see the same customs official (1 example in 1 country)
- Reduce their export costs: women are often faced with longer delays in processing export permits. This has a cost. It makes the price for their goods higher which in turn impacts their wages negatively.



- There is a multiplier effect. If women have to submit their paper work through the internet, they would need to be trained in how to use it and new technologies. The gender digital divide is still extremely high globally, and it would be an opportunity to countries to reduce it. So, the TFA is also giving women new opportunities (indirectly).

In 2 years things have changed in the WTO as the DG outlined earlier this morning.

Change means new ideas, new thinking and new issues.

New issues? Really? Is gender really a new issue in the WTO?

Let's look at the Aid for Trade Initiative. Gender is explicitly highlighted as a key element to take into account. This was defined by the Aid for Trade Task Force in 2006. Over the last 12 years, gender has been a growing objective and priority for Members, developed and developing.

Also, looking at the GATT and WTO objectives - rising standard of living, full employment, income growth, sustainable development (WTO Treaty). Those relate and affect directly and implicitly women's empowerment.

When I first started my "Trade and Gender" journey (if I may say so), I began by exploring 4 years of trade policy review reports. The findings surprised me.

- In over 100 reviews, almost ½ of the countries under review mention trade policies that empower women.

They mostly target sectors such as finance, agriculture, GP and tourism. And most of the members under review have included women's empowerment in their national or regional trade strategies.

- Now, how many of us knew this?

So when someone tells me there is today a momentum, we should grab it now before it fades away. I am not convinced. I do not think the issue of women's empowerment will fade away. For the simple reason that women are too important for economies that, for example, face shortage in their workforce, or in key economic sectors. -> example of Nigeria construction sector, Zambia mining sector.

International women's day is a key annual milestone and it helps us set the tone for the work we will carry out this year. It also helps us look back to review progress achieved.

And it is important to build on this work and "balance for better".

Thank you!