

Roundtable Discussion on
« Gender and Trade »

3rd November 2003, Geneva

hosted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Geneva Office

Intending to promote political dialogue and future cooperation the roundtable on “Gender and Trade” on 3 November 2003 brought together 22 representatives of Geneva-based international organizations (WTO, UNCTAD, ILO, ECE) partly active in the Inter-Agency Task Force on Gender and Trade, diplomatic missions, NGOs and experts for stocktaking and networking on gender and the multilateral trade negotiations at the WTO.

The roundtable was chaired by Ambassador *Yolande Biké* (Mission of the Republic of Gabon), former women’s minister of her country and member of the Women Ambassadors Network, who in her opening remarks identified the lack of analysis regarding the impact of trade on women as a main problem in dealing with the gender issue.

With reference to the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancún, *Brigitte Young*, professor of International and Comparative Political Economy at the University of Muenster (Germany) and co-author of the study “The Doha Development Round, Gender and Social Reproduction” (FES Occasional Papers, No 7), recalled that the WTO has made so far no statement concerning the impact of trade liberalization on women, - regardless of the NGOs’ assertion that trade liberalization increases poverty and that the adjustment costs are largely borne by women and the poor. Questioning, however, the availability of the necessary tools to implement gender mainstreaming in the WTO, she especially addressed the issue of an adequate methodology (e.g. what indicators to select that allow for differentiating between different policies and their respective impacts in order to clearly isolate trade policies as having a negative gendered impact). Up to now, there is no systematic and coherent analysis if an open, rule-based multilateral trading system benefits all nations and people alike; most studies done by governments are focusing on the fiscal impact of trade and liberalization alone.

Besides, Ms. Young pointed out that, since gender and trade is a two way relationship, it is not sufficient to look only at the impact of trade on gender relations. One will as well have to consider the negative impacts gender inequalities may have for the success of trade policies.

Illustrating the gender dimension of the established definition of work - which as an economic term is tied to the concept of wage earning and thus omits much of the labour women contribute to the economy in terms of education, health care and volunteer work – Ms. Young underlined that the inclusion of the “care economy” as a core economic activity, as demanded by feminist economists, would fundamentally challenge the economic paradigm within which macro-

economic policy functions. Moreover, this would entail a debate about the commodification of public goods as is suggested within the WTO framework under GATS. She concluded that it cannot be enough simply to add women, what is called for is rather a discussion over the conceptualization of the meaning of the economy itself.

Brigitte Holzner, Senior Lecturer in Women and Development at the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague, Netherlands) and chair of WIDE, a European network of women's NGOs and individuals, which aims at influencing the activities of international economic and development players from a feminist perspective, opened her statement with the remark, that whereas WTO policies claim to be gender-neutral, they are in fact gender-blind, due to a) a narrow understanding of economy, which excludes the care economy, b) ignorance about existing gender inequalities in access to and control over resources and about gender-differences in the division and the valuation of labour and c) indifference towards poor people's well-being.

Addressing the question if gender-mainstreaming is desirable at the WTO, she explained that gender mainstreaming can be seen from two perspectives: an instrumental and a transformational one. Whereas opening a Gender Desk inside the WTO would imply accord with the WTO as a body of regulating trade, acceptance of its mandate, structure, and procedures, and a belief in free trade as having the potential to become fair trade, a transformatory understanding of gender mainstreaming would ask fundamental questions regarding the rightfulness of the WTO's existence and its underlying paradigm of neoliberalism. According to Ms. Holzner, feminist economists are developing a more holistic view about the economy, which considers trade in commodities as only one form of market exchange, besides alternative markets (e.g. local trading systems, alternative currencies and barter) and non-market exchange (e.g. household flows, gifts and indigenous exchange), thus challenging the "add-on" approach. Ms. Holzner herself doubted whether gender mainstreaming at the WTO is a worthwhile strategy, she indicated that there is a need to replace the masculine model of trade by an alternative of a Human Rights motivated economy that brings dignity and well-being for all.

The Inter-Agency Task Force on Gender and Trade was represented by *Anh-Nga Tran-Nguyen*. Having been created against the backdrop of globalization the Task Force's main objectives are gender equality and poverty reduction (= Millennium Development Goals), women being among the most affected by poverty. Provided activities include impact analysis of international trade and investment agreements and socio-economic analysis of the linkages between trade and gender.

Defining gender gaps as an imbalanced power position, unequal access to quality employment and resources and an unequal income of women and men, Ms. Tran-Nguyen as well underlined the difficulty in determining appropriate factors to measure gender gaps. According to her, this difficulty is largely due to the fact that the way in which benefits and adjustment costs of trade liberalization are split up between women and men is shaped by different agreements, whose impacts are depending on the governments' policy

capacities to react. Arguing that the effects of trade on women are not exclusively negative ones, she cited, by way of example, the newly industrialized countries where the export-orientation has provided women with various job opportunities. Ms. Tran-Nguyen stressed the need for a comprehensive social analysis that could be conducted in a way similar to the EU's impact study of the WTO agreements on environment. Finally, she gave an outlook on UNCTAD XI, which will deal with gender-related questions.

Adair Heuchan from the Canadian Mission remarked that even though the world trade system is no win-win system, the WTO is there to stay, "it needs no revolution but an evolution" with development and gender issues taken into account. She mentioned the integrative framework for trade and development in LDCs, which includes the World Bank, IMF, UNCTAD, UNDP, WTO and ITC and supports the funding of developing countries as part of the poverty reduction strategies. A similar framework with respect to gender could be based on the three pillars of a) representation of women, b) gender mainstreaming and c) analysis of the role of women as producers, consumers and entrepreneurs and provide for access to resources, niche markets and networking. Perorating, Ms. Heuchan stressed that since there will only be one chance for bringing the gender issue to the WTO, the strategy has to be carefully considered.

As the representative of the International Gender and Trade Network in Geneva *Daniela Perez-Gavidia* attended the roundtable and gave an introduction to the work of the IGTN, a Southern-led network of feminist gender specialists which, being organized in 7 regions (Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, North America and the Pacific), provides technical information on gender and trade issues and acts as political catalyst to enlarge the space for a critical feminist perspective and global action on trade and globalization issues. Considering international trade as important for development, the network especially supports processes that build sustainability of the social reproductive work (care economy) and provides for literacy training on key trade economic issues, advocacy and networking possibilities. With regard to the studies of gender and social implications of proposed trade policies, Ms Perez-Gavidia pointed out, that structural adjustment in the past led to an intensification of women's care activities.

A controversial issue in the open discussion following the introductory statements concerned the question how to proceed. On the one hand, it was demanded to "keep it simple" and annotated that even though the "add-on" approach may not work well, the alternative, that is, changing the conceptual framework, is no option; - it will take forever and concrete moves forward are needed. On the other hand, however, it was pointed out, that there is a contradiction between the claim to keep it simple and the question how to do it, since even the neoclassical model itself as established by Adam Smith and David Ricardo is quite differentiated. Staying in the instrumental language of the neoclassical model and, at the same time, employing a language understandable to the delegates might, however, prove difficult, because the

delegates are rather lawyers, diplomats and politicians than economists. It was therefore suggested to apply different approaches for different audiences and stated that, in order not to leave the issue to lawyers and economists alone, a multidisciplinary team would probably be most effective.

In the debate on whom to address the WTO Secretariat in Geneva was referred to as an “amorphous institution”. *Patrick Rata* (WTO Secretariat) outlined that “WTO” is only an acronym for the member states and that, up to now, there exists no initiative power of the Secretariat. Consequently an issue can only be on the agenda if brought forward by the member states. He therefore advised to direct gender-specific topics to the governments of WTO member states and the ministries concerned. It was objected, however, that the governments are often not well informed about the ongoing WTO negotiations.

The discussion then focused on a more general critique of the WTO concerning its lack of democracy, transparency and accountability. Some participants demanded the introduction of a majority voting procedure - currently all agreements and decisions concerning rules and procedures require consensus of the 148 member states, of which 30 aren't even represented in Geneva - , while others clearly feared that this would reinforce the unequal power distribution and further discriminate developing countries. Contradictorily discussed as well was the issue of the WTO's informal structure (e.g. the greenroom meetings). On the one hand, it was criticized for being undemocratic and intransparent whereas, on the other hand, some discussants pointed out that this informality could as well be an opportunity.

To sum up, some agreement was reached that, since the nature of the WTO agreements leaves limited space for mere gender policy, the gender perspective might best be brought into the WTO in the context of development and poverty reduction, the exclusion of women hindering economic growth. Fundamental, however, would be a thorough knowledge of the contents of the agreements.

In her closing statement, *Lakshmi Puri*, Director of the UNCTAD Trade Division, stressed the need for clarification of the existing relationship between trade and gender. She called the WTO a “different world” and underlined the importance of winning the intellectual argument. The gender dimension has to be brought into the negotiations by combining it with the developmental one, as well as with social and environmental problems.

Referring to the tension between the rights-based and the liberalization-based approach, Ms. Puri advised against a negative reaction of developing countries, if they have to fear that the gender issue is only a pretext for protectionism by the industrialized countries. She criticized that by putting emphasis only on how women don't get enough, the positive agenda is neglected. Citing the example of EPZ (Export Processing Zones) and especially Sri Lanka, Ms. Puri pointed out that trade can offer new possibilities to women in poor countries. Finally, she explicitly advised to mature the gender issue before bringing it to the WTO.

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