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Trade and gender: Addressing barriers to women's decent work through trade policy

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Summary

- Sustainable development, which has gender equality and women's economic empowerment at its heart, is one of the objectives of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The support provided through different Ministerial Conferences on the work on trade and gender, the establishment of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG) in 2020 as well as the establishment of a Trade and Gender Office at the WTO is allowing WTO Members to improve their capacities to integrate gender issues into their trade policies.
- Strengthening the link between women's extensive roles in the economy and international trade is necessary to foster economic development and requires supporting women's participation through different types of trade policy.
- Although most trade policies with a gender lens focus on female entrepreneurs, some WTO Members are using trade policies generally to specifically address the challenges women face as workers.
- This includes fostering employment opportunities and tackling gender segregation in low-level, low-paid jobs in trade-related sectors as well as addressing working conditions and gender-based violence in exporting companies.
- Trade policies are also being used to tackle gender gaps in employment in export-oriented sectors by supporting women's skill development and by addressing detrimental labour conditions. This has been the case of some national policies that support women's skills development through capacity-building programmes or training elements of regional trade agreements (RTAs) that integrate gender-focused education provisions, and of a few Aid for Trade programmes.
- The discussion presented in this chapter concludes that a "blended approach" that considers different types of trade policies can be a powerful way to advance women's access to formal employment and decent work in trade.

Background and introduction

Women are important contributors to the economy and society overall. Even when their participation in traditional employment has been usually lower when compared to men, they remain active in and outside of the formal labour market. Notably, as seen in this chapter, in many countries and export-oriented sectors, employed women outnumber male workers.

Nevertheless, overall, women still face numerous barriers that hinder their participation into the formal labour market, including in jobs linked to export-oriented firms. Chiefly, among other aspects, they lack access to resources and carry most, if not all, of the burden of unpaid care work while having to endure the challenges associated to gender social norms that can act as trade barriers and can hinder their economic empowerment.

This chapter also acknowledges that women's challenges are not only a matter of increasing the quantity of jobs but also of improving their quality. When working in export-oriented sectors, women are largely confined to low-paid, low-level and unskilled jobs. Overall, it is important to support women's participation in high-skilled, better paid, and formal employment.

To address these issues, governments are using various trade policies, such as national development strategies and sectoral national trade policies, RTAs and Aid for Trade programmes that foster women's access to formal employment in export-oriented sectors. There are also challenges associated to these efforts: governments' lack of interministerial collaboration and the disconnection among various types of trade policies. The "blended approach" of trade policies proposed in this chapter can contribute to tackling these challenges.

Research questions and methodology

The aim of this chapter is to explore various types of trade policies and how they can be combined with socially oriented measures to support formal employment and overall decent work for women.

This chapter explores four types of trade policy instruments: national trade policies or strategies; gender provisions in free trade agreements (FTAs) and regional trade agreements (RTAs); Aid for Trade programmes; and provisions in WTO agreements, including development-related decisions adopted by the WTO.

The chapter's methodology is based on the analysis of WTO Members' Trade Policy Reviews, the WTO Aid for Trade Monitoring and Evaluation Exercises, and Members' notification to the WTO on their FTAs and RTAs as well as on the review, through a gender lens, of provisions in WTO agreements and other governments' development decisions.

Findings and policy considerations

While there is a strong demand for female workers in many trade-related sectors, especially in the post-COVID-19 world, women's economic contributions to these industries are often not valued to the same extent as men's, in terms of wages and positions held. In fact, women continue to face unsafe and discriminatory working environments.

Trade policy at different levels is helping to address these and other challenges to gender equality. Some governments have been designing national trade policies in a gender-responsive way that promotes women's employment, while also addressing issues of wage inequality and harassment and violence against women. Other governments have been providing

financial incentives to the private sector to pursue similar objectives. In addition, several RTAs have adopted provisions to enhance equal access to job opportunities. Similarly, as this chapter shows, some Aid for Trade programmes follow this trend and address gender discrimination in employment and gender-based violence.

Many governments have also integrated capacity-building programmes or included training elements into their trade promotion measures targeting women. Besides supporting women entrepreneurs, some governments have also established training programmes targeting female workers in export sectors. However, as seen in this chapter, only a few policies include programmes that train women to enter currently male-dominated sectors, where they can earn two to three times more than in the traditional sectors where they are concentrated.

Overall, governments have designed trade policies that address the employment barriers women face in export sectors and they could use the range of trade policies at their disposal to ensure that trade benefits women. In this sense, the Aid for Trade programmes, national trade policies and gender provisions in FTAs could be combined in a "blended approach" to also address key gendered social policies. Also, governments could use the "flexibilities" provided by WTO agreements, such as the Agreement on Agriculture, to support women's decent work. Additionally, ILO Conventions that protect women at work, ILO's Decent Work Programme and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are referenced in most FTAs that contain gender provisions.

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