



Trading Stories: Experiences with Gender and Trade

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Edited by Marilyn Carr and Mariama Williams.
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The gap between men and women in social, cultural and economic equality is not inevitable. Bridging this disparity has been a goal of policymakers to reduce overall poverty and improve standard of living. The existing literature has typically overlooked feminist economics, especially the ramifications of trade policies with respect to gender. To address this issue, the Commonwealth Secretariat has been trying to make governments and institutions mindful of the differences in the actual and potential benefits of a policy that are realized by the two genders. As a part of this wider effort, the editors of *Trading Stories*, Marilyn Carr and Mariama Williams, seek to integrate gender analysis with trade policies. They facilitate this by addressing a broad range of concerns associated with trade, such as health, food security and labour standards, among others. Carr and Williams examine these

policies beyond just economic implications in terms of wages and employments, but also social status, household dynamics, standard of living, among others.

While in some cases export-led growth has made the labour force more inclusive of women, the losses have outweighed the gains in the informal sector. The book sheds light on institutional failure in providing adequate gender specific adequate support and provides evidence of how women in various industries have suffered as a result of freer trade. These inadequacies range from the inability to provide support for skill development, inefficiency in promoting import competition, or lack of adequate protection for the vulnerable female labour force. The book strives to sensitize governments to the plight of the women as a result of the liberalization policies adopted by them. It proposes interventions for various institutions using contributions from 20 case studies. Each of these conclude with policy recommendations for governments, NGOs and international organizations to empower the female labour force.

Carr states that while export-led growth has created an increased demand for unskilled labour force, the markets for such goods are becoming flooded and highly competitive. With the help of the first 10 case studies, the book looks at how the outcomes of trade policies vary by gender, constrained by the varying cultural and socioeconomic structures of different countries and sectors. They examine the impacts of import liberalization, loss of quota protection, service liberalization and issue of non-tariff barriers in developing Commonwealth countries.

A common theme finds that the practices of 'immiserising growth' and product diversification have excluded the unskilled and vulnerable female labour force. For example, in Kenya, as the Multifibre Agreement was phased out, textile demand became unpredictable and flexible. Thus, women, who are more efficient on the assembly line than men, became a larger part of the seasonal workforce because they rarely took legal action or participated in a union. Faced with longer working hours and harsher conditions, textile employment consequently became more suitable for younger and single women. In this way, women, who comprised 60-70% of the textile workforce in Kenya suffered. Similar situations were observed in Lesotho, Uganda, and India alike. Therefore, the contributor, Paul Kamau, called for closer coordination between the government and other stakeholders to ensure violations against the female workforce ended. When gender perspective is lost by the policymakers, the potential benefits of liberalization may not be reaped by women. Even

in the modern sectors today, Carr also argues that women still face hurdles that discourage inclusion in the labour force, although these difficulties are different from those of traditional industries. To stress the importance of considering a gender-driven outlook, the contributors, Mariama William and Carol Narcisse, give the example of India where about 70% of the workforce in call centres are women. Hence, local, regional and international policymakers need to ensure better working conditions, promote entrepreneurship and impart relevant training programs to women.

The multiple case studies in the first half of Trading Stories conclude that despite the positive relationship between women involvement and trade, there is no clear evidence of any relationship between trade policies and women empowerment. Thus, the section ends by urging policymakers to invest in women, infuse a gender-sensitive social mandate and focus on poverty eradication.

The second part focuses on providing best practices for policymakers to overcome economic and social constraints faced by women from increased globalization. These include measures taken by governments, NGOs, international agencies and the private sector to improve linkages between women and trade. The case studies cover the major sectors in trade in diverse Commonwealth countries such as exports of primary commodities, niche markets based on natural products and manufactured exports. A common theme that emerges across all these

examples is that certain issues, such as quality standards and logistical constraints, have had a significant impact, perhaps more than the actual trade policy. And so, approaches to stimulate a win-win situation from implementing a trade policy are proposed. These range from assistance in organizing trade associations, to encouraging producer and marketing cooperatives, to supporting community owned businesses, to providing greater access to technology and training, to raising consciousness about setting up socially responsible and environmentally cognizant export businesses.

Thus, trade liberalization and gender empowerment are not trade-offs. With sound structural institutes in place, these can be made to complement each other. Unfortunately, the linkages that the policy recommendations suggest only allow women to benefit from the various liberalization policies that are implemented. They do not necessary equip women to shape or dictate the policies.

Organizationally, the introductory chapters to each section tie all the case studies together. The historical, empirical and suggestions are well structured in each of these. The chosen examples also provide a holistic view into agriculture, industrial and service sectors. However, given that the goal of Trading Stories is to provide a roadmap to policymakers for interventions, it may be more useful to have a more generalized conclusion at the end of each study, accompanied by an examination of various cross-country linkages. This would help provide a

more bird's eye view of the implications and proposed measures and allow policies to be better subject to constraints of the respective economy. Nevertheless, while Trading Stories does not challenge the current liberalization policies, it provides several valuable recommendations for NGOs, governments, associations and other policymakers promoting feminist economics and gender empowerment.

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