

# Gender Expert Group on Trade

## Position Paper

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## Who we are

The Gender Expert Group on Trade (GEGT) consists of representatives of women's organisations, development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and trade unions, together with academics and observers from United Kingdom (UK) Government departments, all with an interest in gender and trade issues. The Group was established by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and is supported by the Women's National Commission (WNC), the UK Government's official independent advisory body on women. The aim is to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into UK/European Union (EU) trade policy, and to provide independent and expert advice on gender issues to the DTI as appropriate.

## Basic statement of principles

The phrase 'gender and trade' is being increasingly heard in the public discourse on trade policy. But it is often unclear what this juxtaposition of terms means and what actions would follow. Some of its more frequent uses relate to:

- issues of representation and transparency, including demands for more women at the table when trade policy is negotiated and for more light on the proceedings
- the current concern about the social impact of trade measures – necessary because the reasons for women's relative disadvantage in trade outcomes are not well understood and need to be remedied
- the fact that women as well as men can benefit from the greater opportunities and jobs that trade liberalisation should bring, but may need some special treatment to make this a reality

Increasingly, however, the debate around gender and trade leads us to focus on something more profound: *the systematic undervaluing and marginalisation of work in the home and community*. Women, in bearing, for the most part unpaid, the main responsibility for 'social reproduction' (the activity that maintains the labour force, the family and the community) and for reproduction, provide an input into both the private and the public sectors without which the multilateral trading system could not exist. Furthermore, women, the family and the community bear the brunt, and take up the slack, when new trade rules disrupt existing patterns and adjustment is needed. Both free market economics and trade policy analysis obscure these facts by creating a doctrinal gulf between the operation of the market and the social context in which it exists.

The undervaluing of women's unpaid work and the absence of any framework of rights in turn makes women vulnerable to exploitation in paid work. Women now make up the majority of the workforces in multinationals' offshore operations, many paid at very low levels. The specific needs of women workers should be acknowledged in trade arrangements, and by social partners. At work, women's needs go beyond core labour standards. Health issues, reproductive rights, inheritance rights and safety, which includes freedom from violence at work and at home, are important to an increasingly feminised labour market. For example, a culture of violence based on increasing arms and sex trade prevents women participating fairly and effectively in the labour market; and changing terms of trade and the downward pressure on the environment leads to erosion of food security which particularly affects the role of women in the economy.

Until very recently the negotiation and regulation of international trade were regarded as technical matters to be carried out behind closed doors and without public debate. This meant the effects on social reproduction could be largely ignored. While we recognise that trade liberalisation can play an important part in stimulating growth and producing a stable and efficient world economy, one of the aims of our work is to challenge the depoliticised discourse of free trade and reconnect the economic with the social. In this context, together with civil society organisations – women’s NGOs and trade unions – the GEGT plays a vital role in highlighting the gender dimension in trade and public policy.

We recognise that the community of women is diverse and that women are affected by and respond in very different ways to trade measures. For example, while the negative impact of trade policies on women has been mapped out, the positive participation of women entrepreneurs is seldom recognised and is under valued. The issues at stake are complex and we have no intention in the interests of clarity of playing this down. Indeed, the GEGT with its diverse membership and interests embodies this complexity. Gender perspectives have the effect of cutting across orthodoxies and undermining established views. Analysis from a gender perspective is often resisted because of this. What we are looking for, however, is recognition among trade operatives of the social and environmental context in which trade operates and the importance of gender within it. The diversity of the economic and social situations of women requires that likely outcomes and productivity assessments be taken into account in trade negotiations. Only in this way are the needs of social reproduction in both South and North likely to be met, and women’s work, paid and unpaid, given its true value.

In general terms the issues we focus on are as follows:

- As far as the general ethos is concerned we welcome the addition of development as one of the main themes of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This recognises that all states are not equal and that the effects of trade liberalisation are mixed. It also directs attention downwards and outwards in a way that opens space for debate on gender issues.
- The focus on development, however, is not necessarily gender aware. Within the development discourse, and in the trade policy negotiating process, attention needs to be paid not only to inequality between states, but also to inequality *within* states and *between* women and men. Despite a focus on poverty alleviation strategies and development, both sets of inequalities are on the increase.
- At the same time, much more consideration needs to be given to outcomes and to the monitoring and evaluation of trade measures. Here, the collection of gender-disaggregated data is crucial as are case studies (both positive and negative) of the effect on women of trade measures. Much work on this has already been done but it is scattered and lacks visibility. The GEGT supports the undertaking of gender specific impact assessments relating to new trade agreements prior to any general implementation.
- One of the features of the new WTO regimes is that they deal extensively with non-tariff barriers and can thus have an effect on ‘behind the border’ regulation. This reduces the autonomy of states and their ability to cushion the effects of trade-induced change on their populations, and to experiment with new social

models. Women and families very often bear the brunt of this. A gender aware appraisal suggests the need to slow down the rate of application of such measures and caution over the introduction of new ones. This would be in line with the joint DTI/DFID (Department for International Development) statement on the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) issued in March 2005.

- We support the International Labour Organisation's core labour standards including: freedom from discrimination at work, an end to forced and child labour, freedom to associate and bargain collectively and, the right to decent conditions of work. We see these as vital in protecting women workers. These need to be pursued and supported, along with the wider agenda of rights for women, taking account of local situations and struggles.
- There have been many suggestions as to how the WTO process and those of other trade forums might be reformed. Our emphasis is on greater transparency and accountability, and participation from a broader range of interests and sectors in society, including that of women. What is equally important is to operate more effectively in the existing system. In both cases, support for capacity building measures is needed to increase understanding of trade measures among women and of gender issues among trade policy officials, and to increase more generally women's influence in government and in civil society.

### **The context in which we work**

The WTO agreements in 1994 represented a new stage in trade liberalisation, both in the degree of legal enforceability provided and in the expansion of scope to include services (GATS), intellectual property (TRIPS) and agriculture (AOA). They also involved a weakening of the 'special and differential treatment' (SDT) regimes, which had been developed under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The agreements have been carried through in ways which seriously curtail the power of states to cushion or slow down the effects on their societies, and concentrate on 'behind the border' measures which dig deep into state autonomy. The lack of balance in the proposals and the dominance of the developed countries in setting the agenda are now generally recognised. While some developing countries have benefited, the situation of the poorest, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), has shown little improvement. The lack of progress on reducing agricultural subsidies in the developed countries, at the same time as new issues were being put on the agenda, caused the breakdown in negotiations at the Seattle meeting in 1999.

The Doha Development Agenda (DDA) adopted in 2001 represented some attempt to respond to these pressures and resulted from greater cohesion among the Southern states and more powerful lobbying. For the first time in WTO history, development was given the headline. However, the proposals on the agenda were vague, the deadline for completion of a new round (2005) unrealistically short, and the new issues introduced by the developed countries remained on the table. Lack of progress on all fronts, but particularly in agriculture, led to the breakdown of negotiations at Cancun in 2003. Increasingly, some more determined efforts to negotiate seem to be being made in the run up to the WTO ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December 2005, but now that the Southern countries are in a stronger position, they are not so ready to accept deals which will put them at a disadvantage. As a result, talks are becoming more complicated.

The stalling of multilateral negotiations over the past five years, and even before, has meant that much trade energy has gone into regional negotiations and to bilaterals. Thus, the EU is now engaged in drawing up EPAs with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and has negotiated bilateral trade agreements with over 30 countries. The United States similarly has finalised regional agreements in Central America and has bilaterals with a growing number of countries across the world. Some of these agreements go further than the stalled WTO negotiations, and conditionality is also being used in areas such as aid and debt relief to further developed country objectives in the trade policy field. In none of these arrangements is gender given a high priority but gender issues are beginning to be raised. Arguably, in such bilateral agreements it is even more difficult for poor countries to negotiate from a position of strength, without being able to rely on a framework of international rights with a strong gender focus.

These circumstances leave a complex, multi-layered environment in which to pursue the gender issues and approaches outlined above. Each situation and strand in the trade policy agenda has different characteristics and the assessment as to what recommendations to make to enhance gender mainstreaming will differ in each. There are few permanent alliances in gender and trade politics. Southern governments are not necessarily more gender sensitive than Northern ones. Nor do mainstream NGOs always give gender a high priority. The interests (sometimes conflicting) of particular groups of women also become more apparent as do the nature and causes of resistance to gender mainstreaming. Increasing demands by women’s groups towards gender mainstreaming are could push trade policy making into less accountable forums, where it may be more difficult to mediate power imbalances. We have to be ready and able to make the gender arguments at whatever level the real decisions are being taken. The advantage of doing detailed work in specific areas is that it is easier to see where alliances can be created.

Through its work – research, dissemination and lobbying – the GEGT aspires to contribute toward the creation of a fairer and more sustainable multilateral trading system without which gender equality is unlikely to be achieved.

### Glossary

<p>ACP — African, Caribbean and Pacific (countries)          AoA — Agreement on Agriculture          DDA — Doha Development Agenda          DfID — (UK) Department for International Development          DTI — (UK) Department of Trade and Industry          EPAs — Economic Partnership Agreements          EU — European Union          GATS — General Agreement on Trade in Services</p>	<p>GATT — General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade          GEGT — Gender Expert Group on Trade          LDCs — Least Developed Countries          NGOs — Non-governmental Organisations          SDT — Special and Differential Treatment          TRIPS — Trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights          UK — United Kingdom          WNC — Women’s National Commission          WTO — World Trade Organisation</p>
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