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Short Remarks on the Issue of Gender and Trade

In Cancun, there were two parallel meetings: the official WTO negotiations which have so far made no mention of the different impact trade liberalization has on women and men in various regions of the world and its effect on the care and development of the poor. The other meetings, completely disregarded by the official negotiations, included the many NGOs and Gender networks, criticizing trade liberalization and suggesting that liberalization increases poverty and that the adjustment costs of trade liberalization and implementation of trade agreements are borne by women and the poor.

This may be true and I do not doubt the many devastating accounts we heard in Cancun at the International Forum on the Rights of Women in Trade Agreements. In their final declaration, the International Forum with participants from around 33 countries stated “that the big economic powers and the multinational corporations have unfolded new strategies to condition and pressure the developing countries through regional and bilateral agreements that deepened the inequities and disadvantages that impact negatively on the communities, indigenous peoples, and especially women”. The International Forum calls for an alternative agenda to globalization that centers on human, economic, social and cultural rights of women.

It is certainly a step forward that an UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Gender and Trade has been inaugurated with the aim to sensitize policy makers at the national and international level to issues and policies it identifies as important for achieving equality and development. The Task-Force suggests a wide range of activities, including impact analysis of international trade and investment agreements, socioeconomic analysis of the linkages between trade and gender, analysis of institutional issues, capacity building and advocacy.

But the question we face is first whether we have the necessary theoretical tools to embark on such an endeavour. And second, we need to develop concrete steps and policies in order to generate positive effects.

In my short introduction today, I want to address the methodological problems and lack of theoretical analysis over the causal relationship between gender and trade. We face methodological constraints to integrate social and gender impacts in trade policies. There are also methodological problems posed by the difficulty of analyzing sectors that fall under services (GATS), competition, TRIMS, AoA. We also face the problem of what indicators to select for the different sectors.

In our Report for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation “The Doha Development Round, Gender and Social Reproduction”, there is no systematic analysis of how an open, rule-based multilateral trading system impacts on women in different regions of the world. Despite the emphasis on gender mainstreaming we do not have the tools to implement gender mainstreaming in the WTO.

Another difficulty we face is to differentiate between different policies and their impacts. Can we isolate whether trade policies are responsible for a negative gendered impact or whether other policies impact on women?

Irene van Staveren, Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, has also raised the issue of methodological and statistical inconsistencies in analyses that favour trade expansion. Dissident policy makers challenge the trade favouring policies of the World Bank, IMF and WTO, because of their unfounded dogma's as well as their political biases. Does an open trading system favour all nations and all people alike despite their very different positions in the world economy and women and men's different positions within a society? Most studies done by governments focus on the fiscal impact of trade and liberalization, while studies on the impact of shifts in social policies are relegated to NGOs and academic institutions.

At the level of gender, we also know that trade and gender are not a one way street. It is not sufficient to look only at the impact of trade on gender relations. Again, relying on Irene von Staveren's work, she suggests that feminist economists have shown that gender inequalities in society and the economy have had negative impacts for the success of Structural Adjustment Programs including the area of trade. The relationship is not only about trade and its impact on gender, but also on gender inequalities and how it impacts on trade issues.

In addition, we need to ask whether trade and gender can be viewed separately from labour market policy, fiscal policy, educational policy, the debt and financial crises, technology and the present militarization. Many NGOs in Cancun see the liberalization of trade linked to militarization

and report about the coming together of the anti-globalization movement and the peace movement. The study on trade must be used in the broadest sense, including related capital flows, migration flows, institutional changes and geopolitical changes.

A further complication is that concepts that are fundamental to policy-makers are constituted by and constitutive of gender relations. Let me try to illustrate this by focusing on the meanings of trade and how mainstream economists and policy makers use such concepts.

Simplified, trade is linked to the way we produce the goods and services that we exchange on the market. Raw materials, technology and the labour that transforms the raw material go into the production of goods. Wages are the compensation that workers get for their labour.

At first glance, there is nothing particularly gendered about this simple relationship. However, if we now introduce the definition of work from a gendered perspective we get a different reading.

Labour as an economic term is tied to the concept of wage earner and the worker we speak of is assumed to be a worker working in a factory, farm or in the public space. As a consequence, the meaning of a worker is a male worker. We also translate the wage earner as the breadwinner for the family.

Such a simple articulation of social relations erases much of the labour that women contribute to the economy – much of the work that they do in terms of housework and carework and is not counted and therefore remains invisible.

Second, the assumption that women are not breadwinners has long meant that the work they do outside the home is low-waged work even in a context where women are increasingly taking on responsibility as a “breadwinner”.

Finally, a vast majority of the volunteer work – for NGOs, schools, churches is done by women and is also not counted.

Instead of looking at “caring” work as a non-economic activity which is excluded from the national economy, feminist economists have suggested to include it as a core economic activity contributing to the production of labour and the reproduction of social activities within societies. Such a view of the “care economy” would fundamentally challenge the economic paradigm within which macro-economic policy functions. Even more important, it would also force a debate about the commodification of such public goods as health care, education, pensions and other social services as suggested within the WTO framework under GATS and its impact on women and social reproduction.

In summary, I believe that it is not enough simply to add “women” into the concepts and analyse how trade impact on women and men, instead there has to be discussion over the meanings of how we conceptualize the meaning of the economy itself. Such an analysis would lead to a more sophisticated examination of the consequences of macro-economic policy such as trade has on men and women.